IMAGE, ICONOCLASM, AND IDENTITY: A METHOD FOR ABIDING

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ABSTRACT

IMAGE, ICONOCLASM, AND
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The context for this project is South Dayton Presbyterian Church (SDPC) in Dayton, Ohio. The presenting problem is weak identity formation in discipleship in the congregation. If the Guided self-Examination is practiced, then participants will have a resource for developing their identity "in Christ" resulting in increased peace in their lives. The project will be conducted over six weeks. Data will be collected utilizing pre-project and post-project surveys, group discussions, focused journaling assignments, and individual interviews. Because participants of SDPC practiced the Guided self-Examination, they have strengthened discipleship in their identity, resulting in increased peace.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many to be acknowledged for their support of this project. I want to thank my family, especially my mom who has always supported me financially in education, but also with much prayer and love. Thanks to my sister and her lovely children, who are quickly becoming adults. I hope your images of God become more intimate and incredible, more holy, and more loving as you grow older. Ask Him and he will answer you.

Thank you to my wife who has been such a joy in my life. Because of you, I know God in so many new ways. I am humbled by your love for Jesus and have been shaped by your images of God too!

Thank you to Covenant Theological Seminary and Calvin Theological Seminary and the professors who challenged and provoked me to know and understand more than before. Thank you to L'abri Fellowship, particularly in Southborough, MA. The workers, helpers, and students there over the years have shown me what it means to live as a Christian in the world today. I have been loved hard and it changed me. I am grateful and hope I can love others as I have been loved.

Lastly, thank you Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You've been so patient, so kind, so merciful, and so gracious. I pray this small work brings you glory as you continue to reveal more of who you are through the passing of time and events.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the God who we do not fully see yet - but will one day. You are the God of Peace. Thank you for quieting my soul in your presence. May others be drawn to you as your kingdom spreads throughout our minds, hearts, and actions.

INTRODUCTION

This project reflects what it researched, meditated upon, studied, explored, and sought after. It began in a particular time and circumstance when it merged my personal story and church context. There are many ways to refer to this document: a labor of love; the condensation of hundreds of hours of focused work; a form of active sanctification that seeks to engage with the passive sanctification bestowed upon God's children; a spiritual discipline; a series of Identity-Based Examens; a sequence of Guided self-Examinations; a narrative story; a historical document; a spiritual memoir, and many more names would be all correct and true. In reflecting the thrust of this project, its description would be dependent upon who it was being described to. Certain descriptions above would make more sense to one person than another. A person cannot be separated from his or her past and must inevitably deal with, one way or another, what his or her image(s) of God look like. These define how one lives, a person's "being-in-the-world," his or her "spiritual posture." These images of God direct every person's life whether in complete acknowledgement, blind unconsciousness, or somewhere in-between.

The heart of this project wrestles with the non-negotiables of life to empower Christians in their faith. This begins by understanding what a Christian does, and does not, have control over. This seemed important to me in an increasingly post-modern world, where truth seems to be "up to the individual." I also began to see that many of the streams of information that had been converging in my life the past few years were tied

together with some of the themes that would run together in this project. This is a deeply personal project for me. While re-reading the following chapters, I was struck by how much of what I have struggled with personally, has been laid to rest here in peace. The foundations papers all gave form to the wrestling I had been doing with God.

My journey has not been one I would have guessed at or could have imagined. God had many surprises for me, theologically and in every other way. The image of the vine and branches struck me, as an organically connected picture. This metaphor held heavy weight in my mind. It forced me to accept that I was loved by God in a similar manner as the branches were to the vine. Devotio Moderna showed me a segment of history where others before me had struggled in their own time to connect with God. Corruption and skepticism were rampant and personal piety was one of the few ways to develop an intimate relationship with God. Active sanctification was the only kind of sanctification in my life. I was dimly aware of passive sanctification, but it was something that happened once, when you were regenerated. It was a unique event, not a renewable resource. Internal Family Systems (IFS) had been one of the biggest ways I had seen God work in my life and I hoped to share this good news with others as well. IFS gave language to one of the passages I most resonated with in the Bible, Paul's description of himself in Romans 7:15.

In hindsight, the Guided self-Examination, was the next natural step for me. Self-awareness had always been difficult for me. As an addict, I thought this was one of the key places some of the wisdom of recovery could be edifying for the church. And who could be a better guide in this self-awareness than the Holy Spirit? This project created space for the Holy Spirit to commune with the participant's spirit. The reported data and

analysis proved provocative and engaging. Some participants lives were changed deeply, while others stated they would not volunteer again.

The project results regarding the hypothesis were successful or a failure depending upon the person. People discussed how their lives were more peaceful and that the GSE had given them new perspectives to incorporate into their lives. Some stressed the presence of the Holy Spirit. Others spoke of their need for discipline and discipleship in thought and prayer. God spoke in many ways through a single devotional.

God has always been too complicated and too simple at the same time. When we need rest, God is there. When we need a push and encouragement, God is there. When we need mercy, God is there. And when we need justice, God is there. He will always be there meeting our needs. The air we breathe, the thoughts our minds create, the sights we see, the sensations in our nerve endings – God and his fingerprints are in them all. The images of God from the Bible are incredible. Our lives add more pictures and stories, but as the inventory of images grows, we see that God cannot be contained in a picture. When you see Jesus, you can see hundreds and thousands of images all at once. Christ is inherently relational. He is the "Boundaried Accommodator" meeting us where we are, while never abandoning his own integrity or ontology. He does whatever is necessary to bring love to his children. He will never leave or forsake us. As we learn more about God let us learn more about ourselves as we were created in his own image.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Introduction

This chapter is the intersection of the Spiritual Autobiography and Contextual Analysis, which taken together revealed the direction of the project. After meditating and praying on where God was leading, I believed the purpose of this project was to deepen people's relationship with God. How that simple idea took shape is the concern of this paper.

The Doctorate of Ministry (DMin) program offered a structured place to merge one's experience with his or her context for service to the glory of God and the expansion of his kingdom. My personal experience with addiction and professional ministry journey including my Master's degree in Pastoral Care and working as a Christian counselor with addicts and alcoholics, have given me a heart for those who have struggled as I have. I desired to help them break free from false perceptions and turn to the one true God. I believed that the most efficacious way to do this was to examine one's image of God and self. To transform one's identity is to transform one's life. The more a person accepts, believes, and meditates upon who God says he or she is, the more they are transfigured. What appears to be God's dynamic identity is actually an indication of where the individual is in relationship to God at a specific moment in time. The *Imago Dei* (God image) that is imprinted on every human reflects the individual's image of God. So, one's

perception of God is of the utmost importance in discovering God as he says he is and is crucial for life giving relationship. This is unlearning false ideas about God and learning about spiritual reality as God has declared. It is also about having a multivalent inventory of images of God. The Judge is as true as the Rock and Shield, but there are different appropriate times for each image.

While paraphrasing Psalm 51, I believe the Holy Spirit revealed the cry of my soul through the phrase, "Make me an example of what your presence will do to a sinful man." I pray that this project did the same for those who participated in this ministry endeavor. I must not forget what the Psalmist said, "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Ps. 127:1).[1] Jesus said, "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). This is both my endeavor *and* God's project.

The final goal of being in the presence of God is joyful, overflowing worship that participates in the Divine Dance (*perichoresis*) of God's very existence. This project presupposes that all people worship without ceasing. The goal for Christians is to switch from any false gods to the one true God. Often, people are unaware of God's presence in their lives and how choices have a spiritual component. This project facilitated the participants awareness of that spiritual component as they became their own "spiritual director." This means accepting, integrating, embodying, and living out what God says about his children.

The project target audience was South Dayton Presbyterian Church (SDPC) and was designed for Reformed Evangelicals. This project was designed for a specific

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[1] English Standard Version (ESV). Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this document are from the ESV.

audience and sought to serve those willing to admit and address the things in their lives that were keeping them from God. This project's goal was to reconcile Biblical truth with *functional* Christian behavior. This practical embodied theology asked each Christian to open the unseen parts of themselves (the parts of their minds and hearts that were ignored, neglected, or suppressed) into the light of Christ with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Participants engaged in questions that asked them to consider the inconsistencies in their lives seen in the dissonance between belief and behavior.

The Holy Spirit, not the individual, has power for transformation and sanctification. Even things that people "do on their own" are through God's sustaining of their very being and existence. That being the case, individuals can place themselves in a better environment for growth through the laws of nature (visible and spiritual) that God has structured. Like Elijah, we build the altar, but God brings the fire (1 Kings 18:36-38). We must not confuse what each person does in the relationship. This project sought to help tear down old altars of sinful patterns and replace them with the altar to the one true God.

Christians are called to self-awareness in their lives by continually remembering that they are loved and accepted by God in Christ Jesus. This is to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). To remember that we are new creations in Christ can be an easy thing for someone in 2022 in Dayton, Ohio to forget. The average American sees anywhere from four to ten thousand advertisements each day.[2] The average person has approximately six thousand thoughts per day.[3] On average a person experiences around four hundred

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[2] Accessed 5 May 2021. https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2017/08/25/finding-brand-success-in-the-digital-world/?sh=4da466fb626e.

[3] Accessed 5 May 2021. https://www.newsweek.com/humans-6000-thoughts-every-day-1517963.

emotional changes throughout their day.[4] This is an overwhelming amount of information coming at people from *outside* of themselves and from *inside* of themselves. Only by having a secure identity with the foundation of Jesus Christ will a person be able to navigate life with wisdom.

People operate the way they do for a reason, even if they are unaware of the reason, and often it is as simple as, "I was taught to do it this way." Why do this, *this* way, and not *that* way? Every Christian should be seeking answers to these question for themselves as it informs how they steward their lives. Being influenced by one's environment and genetic makeup is natural, therefore, what one does with his or her free will is of supreme importance. This project was an outworking of my free will with God's guidance to offer a tool for transformation through the destruction and recreation of one's images of self and of God.

A major theme of this project is that one's relationship with God is the supreme identity marker of a person's life. God spoke the world into existence, gave us his written word, and Christ came as the living Word (John 1:1). What are Christians doing with the words that God has spoken? Do we memorize or meditate on them? How do we treat them? Is reading the Bible precious or a perfunctory gesture of nominal devotion? Is following God a duty or a privilege? Examining our responses (physically, cognitively, and emotionally) to these questions will reveal to us what we think of the person of God and our relationship with him.

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[4] Teresa Angle-Young, note from "Emotional Intelligence" lecture, part of my cohort's mid-term intensive.

Only when we empty ourselves of the words that are already inside of us, will we be able to take in the words of Jesus and the Bible as supreme. This begins with awareness, a self-examination of our culture, past experience, contextual environment, and of the things that we have internalized and are "normal" for us. The words of our inner critic, the world around us, of teaching from authority figures, of demonic forces, must all be seen for what they truly are. These must be examined through the authoritative voice of what God has said about us as his children. From this foundation we can discard what leads to death and meditate upon and incorporate what leads to life. This exchange of what we already possess for what God declares will be an ongoing theme of this project. Much of what our culture says is freedom and good is actually de-humanizing and sinful.[5] This project pushed back against such voices.

Constantly remembering God's word is a necessity for the Christian. The prodigal son wanted to become a servant when he returned home, but his father would not accept this (Luke 15:17-24). As Christians, we are who God says we are, before *and* after confession and repentance. Without knowing his word, we will inevitably believe someone (potentially ourselves) who says things about us that God never would.

Context

South Dayton Presbyterian Church (SDPC) belongs to the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) denomination and is the sole PCA church in Centerville, Ohio, a suburb

[5] "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!" Isa. 5:20-21.

of Dayton. The PCA stems from the reformed tradition and adheres to doctrinal beliefs such as the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Book of Church Order*.

SDPC is a vibrant congregation and even with an addition built onto the church seven years ago, is exceeding capacity for their current space. The Executive Director has begun reaching out to various realtors in the hope of finding a larger space for the church. Current Sundays have about two hundred and fifty adults attending two services. There are so many children that a second cry room was recently added for all the new mothers and babies.

This congregation is primarily composed of medical, Air Force, and civilian personnel who work at the nearby military base. Since the church's inception in 1988, the typical church member has been transitory because of their occupation. SDPC is located in the suburbs and when the church was founded, there were over 100,000 people living within a six-mile radius of the building.

Based on statistics from the state of Ohio website and census information we can learn some important things about SDPC. Compared to Dayton, Centerville's population is younger on average. People in Centerville are also more likely to be white, highly educated, and less likely to live in poverty than someone in the city of Dayton.

One ongoing challenge for SDPC is to address discipleship for these individuals and families. I spoke with the pastors of SDPC and the needs they mentioned were related to pastoral care, discipleship, resource brokerage, and dealing with the aftermath of the COVID pandemic. More specific needs were related to educating congregant's children; counseling for the hurting, grieving, and sick; navigating the political terrain of

an increasingly polemic and angry culture; and facilitating small groups in a Biblical and healthy way.

To form a picture of SDPC, consider what is printed on the back of their bulletin every Sunday:

> "OUR LITURGY
> Sunday worship is when we gather to experience 'all of life in an hour.' We are called into existence by God in the call to worship, we die to our sin in the confession, we give thanks to God in our offerings, we are taught His ways in the reading and the sermon and we are nourished as we celebrate the past and future feast of God in the Lord's Supper. We do all this as individuals, as a family, and as the people of God together."

SDPC, being a part of the PCA, might partially deserve the nickname given to them being called the "*frozen chosen.*" This might sound pejorative, but it can be taken as a compliment due to the fact that this church takes the Bible and its doctrine very seriously. People who attend SDPC tend to be more cerebral and think things through before making decisions. The posture of the congregants is welcoming, and the church is involved in the community in a variety of ways, including an English as a Second Language (ESL) program, local partnering with the Miami Valley Women's Center (a pregnancy care center), as well as missionary support (local and global), a thriving children's program and summer church camp, and many other ministries.

The idea of additional everyday liturgies resonated with me when developing this project. Transformation is facilitated through patient persistence. Retention is facilitated by repetition. How easily humanity forgets! The whole of the Old Testament could be summed up in the word "*remember.*"[6]

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[6] See Exod. 2:24, 6:5, 13:3; Lev. 26:42, 45; Ps. 77:11-15, etc…

The project was designed to meet some of the needs mentioned by SDPC pastors as well as needs I observed during my time at church. What came out of the Foundation papers alongside this Ministry Context paper was an evening devotional designed to aid congregants in pastoral care, discipleship, and self-awareness. The *Guided self-Examination* (GSE) is the culmination of these various ingredients coming together to glorify God and edify congregants.

Before explaining the GSE, my ministry journey at SDPC involved being the sole teacher and facilitator for the *Abide: Gospel Transformation and Addiction* group which met every other week for a year (August 2021 through July 2022). This group was an hour long and contained biblical and interdisciplinary teaching related to sin, addiction, and applying the gospel in one's life. Much of what I saw in participants in that group (who were primarily from SDPC) influenced the design of the GSE. Abide also involved an exploration of using questions in-between meetings as provocations for understanding where one stood in relation to God.

Questions from the Bible were sent out via text to participants three times between meetings. These texts would involve looking at a question from the Bible in its original context and then applying the question to the individual's life. Whether through imaginative prayer, such as picturing Jesus asking you this same question (e.g., when he does, what is the tone of his voice?) Or through visualizing the original biblical context in your mind (e.g., what is the primary emotion you recognize while witnessing this story?) The *Abide* formatted structure was influential in designing the GSE, primarily because it was contextually placed in a Reformed Evangelical setting.

It is important for attendees to recognize where they are spending their limited resources. There are twenty-four hours in a day. Approximately eight are spent sleeping and another eight working. What we do with those last eight hours shows the functional desire of our hearts. Am I working too much overtime? Am I serving my family, my boss, myself, or God? Perhaps more importantly, what is my motive for those actions? And this is just referencing one's corporeal hours. Where are my mind and heart for the majority of the day? Where the hours are spent reveals what one truly treasures in one's heart.

Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt. 6:21). My hope was that by engaging participants in *intentional* rhythms (as opposed to mindless, partially examined lives), they would become increasingly self-aware of the competing rituals they were involved with. What was the functional treasure of their life? Jesus came that we might have life abundant and Christian experience ought to reflect this. External life might not appear ideal, but did the participant's peace with God grow?

While in seminary I was taught in a pastoral care class that my task was to bring God's presence to bear on the individual's presenting problem. The GSE is designed to facilitate the Holy Spirit's presence in the participants life on a daily basis. So called "presenting problems" are the everyday issues of life that people struggle to contend with wisely (i.e., are they inviting God along with his wisdom and resources into the situation or dealing with it using their own resources?) My hope was that those who work the GSE into their Lenten 2023 season would see, believe, and feel God's reassuring love towards them. This reassurance would then fuel them to live into what God has already declared them to be: new creations in Christ and children of the King.

Ministry Journey

The Spiritual Autobiography was an excellent tool for revisiting and reexamining moments that made deep unconscious impacts on my life. When such moments are not recognized and appraised, I saw that they were affecting me without my knowledge of them doing so. I was ignorant and had given my power away by refusing to look at (or suppress or ignore), the wounds that I carried that were my primary identity markers. This project sought to facilitate the repurposing of one's past for worshipping God. Reframing the past is a tool for life-giving stewardship and allowed me to see *kairos* moments in a new light. Kairos here means specific events in time where God's direction was clearly directing my life.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 speaks to this when Paul says to the church, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." This project shared the fruit of my own spiritual journey, afflictions, hopes, and experiences with those in similar situations. My past is only one part of who I am, and God redeems my past as much as he will redeem my future.

Looking back, I realized that a crucial question for myself as a Christians is: will I act like Judas or Peter? The difference is that while both sinned against Jesus, Judas continued to turn from Jesus while Peter accepted love, grace, and mercy from the Christ. I was a "Judas" for years before I became a "Peter." This project seeks to develop and strengthen the "Peter" aspects of participants lives and to starve out the "Judas" aspects. I

had to go through (and continue to go through) weakness so that I could rely on, and manifest, Christ's strength in me. This project worked towards facilitating that in others.

The Spiritual Autobiography showed me how God has been present in my multi-generational family story and how I have just begun to recognize my part in *his* story. Today, I understand that I am a part of his family and am in his narrative. I surveyed the first forty years of my life and saw more of a "big picture" in my relationship with God and how he has been relentless in his pursuit of me, though at times I felt he was distant or absent in my life. *He has always been with me and always will be with me*. I will always be with him.

Christians profess to follow Christ, but frequently treat ourselves in ways that we would be horrified to witness if we saw it happen to someone else. Do we care about ourselves in the way that God does? Or do we only care about what *we* think and ignore what *God* says? We are all guilty of substituting our own voice for God's voice.

Cultivating awareness of the difference between our cognitive beliefs and embodied actions will be the starting point of investigation in the GSE. Our actions reveal our hearts and any dissonance between belief and action can be viewed as an opportunity to reconcile oneself to God and his dynamic images. Emotional intelligence will be applied throughout the GSE so that emotions are seen as helpful signposts instead of things to fear or to placate. We are not our emotions. They are just one part of a complex matrix that comprises a human being.

Part of my story is that through addiction, God allowed me to convince myself that my image of God was wrong. He was not a vindictive, angry god who was impossible to placate. I came to see that the biblical God was the God of both justice and

anger, but that he was conciliated in the righteousness of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Any vindictiveness he had was drank by Christ in the cup of wrath. His anger was towards sin, not me. What I experienced was terrible and difficult at the time, but God preserved me and opened my eyes. Experience shapes people, and if they do not conform to reality, they can break. They can "hit rock bottom," as they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, which I would suggest is what happened when the prodigal son "came to himself." Though we might feel at the point of despair, God's grace is always available, and "a bruised reed he will not break" (Isa. 43:7).

Reality showed me that I was not a humble person. Besides truth with compassion, winsomeness and humility will be purposefully integrated into the GSE. Experience has also taught me to practice *evaluation* instead of *judgment.* To adopt such a spiritual posture took years of humiliation before I realized I could humble myself *first*, instead of letting reality discipline me. This was a preemptive move of *self-interest*, not *selfishness*, yet God honored my move towards a greater image of him than I previously held. James 4:10 is an imperative statement with a promise, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." This is easy to communicate, but difficult to *embody* and practice. How we act and treat others impacts all involved.

Awareness of the malleability of one's image of God and one's image of self is one of the keys for Christian growth. All people are already destroying and recreating both images regularly, but are Christians inviting the Holy Spirit to participate in this critical work in their lives? When we hear about yet another mass shooting, or major natural disaster, it affects our image and understanding of God. Looking at how COVID has shaped people recently should make this clear as it is one of the church's biggest

current challenges. People are asking, “Where is God in all this?” and “What kind of God would allow this?” God’s character is constantly being questioned.

The “ideal participant” for this project is one who has come to understand that the former things that might have been useful (and even helpful at one point) have become blocks or traps that are now de-humanizing them. The once adaptive has become maladaptive and the path the person is on does not lead to freedom or peace. The GSE facilitates spending time with the Holy Spirit on a regular basis to address any maladaptive thinking (cognitively wrong theological images) and behavior (embodied functional theology).

This project took the things that helped me personally and consolidated them in a structured way to offer help for those who desire it. I have experienced freedom and peace with God by attachment to God. While once running from God, today I sit with him. When I turned thirty, I was in a sixty-day rehab for alcoholism. When I turned forty, I had over four and a half years of clean time, a Master’s degree, and had survived open heart surgery and my father’s death. I am not perfect, but God has been faithful, and I hope to share his faithfulness with others. I have been fiercely loved and wish to share that love with whoever would accept it for what it is. I am who I am by the grace of God.

Developing the Synergy

The context of SDPC presented a challenge as my own story dealt more with primarily physiological addictions (i.e., alcohol and heroin), while I anticipated more behavioral addictions such as gambling and pornography in the *Abide* group. For most of the time, this proved to be the case. I began to think about similarities and differences in

these types of sins and came to see that the major underlying similarity had to do with identity. One author puts it this way, "The addict has a problem, but it is not a medical one: he does not know how to live."[7]

The GSE was a natural outworking of the *Abide* group due to the stress on self-discovery questions and the necessity of acknowledging that as Jesus said, "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). This project has its origins in my own story and the *Abide* group, but it was applicable for all who sought to draw closer to God by examining themselves and how their relationship with God is built on images that change. In my personal life I was getting married and moving to a difference city and church, but I desired to serve those who had been my fellow brothers and sisters at SDPC. I also desired to make a tool that would be useful without my physical presence. For this project, utilitarianism was part of the embedded structural design.

The GSE fulfills the need of a tool to spur people on to deeper relationship with Christ and good works specifically in the SDPC context. I found that having regular attendance and participation was completely outside of my control for the Abide group. I prayed that God would use that time in group to plant seeds leading to more life in Christ. The GSE brings more of God's kingdom rule into the individual's life. A small group or entire church who participated in the GSE could potentially be a catalyst for their community as the Holy Spirit reconciles people's exiled parts to themselves and God.

This DMin project facilitates connection to the Holy Spirit with the purpose of living a life of *intentional stewardship.* If people do not honestly face and address their

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[7] Theodore Dalrymple, *Romancing Opiates: Pharmacological Lies and the Addiction Bureaucracy* (New York, NY: Encounter Books, 2006), 109.

current lives, they might end their lives with a substantial amount of regret. Christians, of all people, should be able to avoid this by the gifts they already possess in Christ.[8] Sin is de-humanizing. This project encouraged humanizing behavior and making the best use of one's time here on earth which begins by abiding in Jesus Christ.

This project worked toward achieving each person's "best self in Christ" in a progressive and continual sense. Change is inevitable, but whether we change for the better or worse is dependent upon our acceptance of God's invitation to us, as we increasingly open our lives to him. This project directs participants toward a "with-God-life," in *all* components of our personhood.

For the Christian, the human ideal was Jesus Christ, the image of God made flesh. The GSE considered questions that revolved around God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in various images. The perceptions (one's subjective image) of these persons in the Trinity form and shape our beliefs and behaviors.

All people can be viewed as "living human documents."[9] Simple observation can show that what we claim to believe and what our actions reveal, often do not line up. We recognize that humans are creatures of cognitive dissonance (e.g., Paul's statement in Rom. 7:15) when we pause to examine our lives. This project *narrowed the gap* of that

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[8] "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation *without regret*, whereas worldly grief produces death." 2 Cor. 7:10, emphasis added. Christians understand that God was with them before they made a decision to follow him. The events leading up to one's decision to surrender to Christ were seen by God and under his control. I have personally benefitted from my heroin addiction, parent's divorce after thirty-seven years, and open-heart surgery. I do not recommend these as catalysts for spiritual growth and transformation, but in hindsight I have seen God's faithfulness and patience towards me as I have changed ever so slowly. The Christian understands that "it takes what it takes" so bring a person to a posture of humble acceptance and obedience towards God and his holy love.

[9] Robert C. Dykstra, ed., *Images of Pastoral Care: Classical Readings* (United States of America: Chalice Press, 2005).

dissonance. It turned down the volume of other voices and created space to hear God's voice as participants learned to shape their lives to his reality.

There is a "formal curriculum" and a "hidden curriculum" in the church.[10] The claimed beliefs (doctrine) often do not match up with the lived experience (ethos).[11] This project will speak "truth with love," which has just as much to do with *what* is said (doctrine), as *how* it is conveyed (ethos). When we look at who Jesus is, and how he came to humanity, as a vulnerable baby who was eventually murdered, we begin to understand how God holds truth simultaneously with love. God's ethos and doctrine align perfectly with compassion as he is "gentle and lowly in heart" (Mt. 11:29). Scripture is foundational for this project, as it reveals how to worship God "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). The Word carries authority, power, and hope. Individual Christians and the church are at risk, just like any other organization, of having blind spots and self-deception between claimed belief and action. The GSE will focus on drawing out such incongruities with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The purpose of recognizing these inconsistencies is not to condemn, but to make an assessment, and then bring those previously held back parts of our lives to God for his healing power. Christians are called to confess and repent. Only God has the power to heal though we can place ourselves in better situations for that healing to occur. As Hebrews 11:6 says, "he rewards those who seek him." The GSE helps bring all parts to God for reconciliation and wholeness.

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[10] John Ortberg, "Your Hidden Curriculum," *Christianity Today*, September 6, 2022, http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2009/winter/hiddencurriculum.html.

[11] Wade Bradshaw, *Searching for a Better God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Authentic Publishing, 2007).

GSE themes and questions revolved around several topics: (1) non-negotiables such as being one's own spiritual director and shaping one's own spiritual posture; (2) cultivating self-awareness and mindfulness in identity markers; (3) recognizing self-deception and self-compassion to reduce de-humanizing behaviors and increase humanizing ones; (4) comparing and contrasting the *old self* with the *new self*; and (5) wisdom and peace. Internal Family Systems thinking was interspersed through these devotionals where appropriate. These themes and topics were all taken into account under the umbrella of identity via images of God and self.

The GSE emphasized Christ's characteristics in his interactions with people. These partially include: meeting people where they are; compassion; acting out of an explicit moral context but not condemning; inviting choice; asking probing questions; being scandalously inclusive; recognizing one's limitations and practicing self-care; recognizing each person's uniqueness; using language and illustrations people will understand; not being coercive or manipulative; preferring dialogue over monologue; not minimizing the cost of discipleship, and more.[12] The project helped teach participants how to give pastoral care to their inner ecosystem as they examined how Jesus acted in his compassionate posture towards them.

The structure of the project allowed for each person's unique story as well as their universal humanity. Every individual is like *all* others, like *some* others, and like *no* other. This project will differentiate between what the Bible says is humanizing (developing a moment-to-moment spirituality with the Holy Spirit), as opposed to de-

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[12] David G. Benner, *Care of Souls: Revisioning Christian Nurture and Counsel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1998).

humanizing (false or partially true images of God or self which generally stem from *internalized life commands*).

The Foundation papers addressed various non-negotiable issues that relate to self-awareness and the importance of one's images of God and self. A person is always his or her own spiritual director whether they are aware of it or not. A person always has a spiritual posture of either humility or arrogance, of teachableness or hardness. Many times, the person is a mixture of these depending on the way he or she has been shaped by their experiences. Ideally, the GSE will search out the areas that are acting as "character armor" instead of using Christ's armor. Repentance is not always easy, but God invites us to know him better and ourselves better. Changing one's mind gives more nuance to one's relationship with God and self, which in turn effects the way one relates to others in everyday life.

This is all possible due to the fact that the Holy Spirit is the one who transforms people. The individual can *change*, but the Holy Spirit *transforms*. The first is nominal in one's own power, and the second is deep and lasting and happens through abiding in Christ. The project participant will be able to facilitate and work in tandem with the Spirit. For example, honesty will be necessary for progress to occur.[13]

Defining terms clearly for project participants was critical. For instance, *spiritual posture*, was language that was utilized in the GSE. This phrase was explained in the introduction to the project as "the interactive relationship of defined images of God and oneself." A person's spiritual posture is both chosen and largely unconscious. The variety of images of God and self tacitly implies that we often are not utilizing the large

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[13] "The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." Ps. 145:18.

inventory of images that are available to us. People often embrace the primary image they were raised with, and it dominates their lives accordingly.

Psalm 103:2 tells us to "forget not all his benefits." We are *commanded* to remember and focus on the benefits of being in good relationship with God as the rest of the Psalm shows. Viewed side by side, the things of this earth are transitory vapor compared to the treasure we have in Christ, but we generally do not choose to focus on the gifts we have in God. As Jesus said, "what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Mt. 16:26) This project poured fuel onto the implanted fire of the Holy Spirit inside the volunteer participants to consume all other smaller fires. This happened through attention management and practiced daily time spent with God (prayer and meditation).

My fifth semester providentially took place during Lent. This allowed the GSE to act as a spiritual discipline for those seeking God in this season. The GSE is simply a way to intentionally spend time with God on a regular basis. It was designed to address the most important thing about a person, namely, what God declares about the individual. For the project participant to believe and act out of what God says would be to experience love, holiness, joy, freedom, and peace. Placing God's word above all others was a key theme for this project. This allowed community to occur within the individual (in the Spirit-led Self as shown in the Interdisciplinary Foundations) as well as within

community (as we are connected to one another not directly, but through Christ.)[14] This focus on God's word led to peace with God, ourselves, and others.[15]

One of the most crucial principles of this project was learning to be kind to oneself (i.e., one's spiritual posture). If this was not addressed, transformation would not be possible. The goal is to accept the grace you would give someone you cared about *with yourself first*. This originates from God's view of us, whose love overwhelms us to the point of acceptance. Jesus remained on the cross while people laughed at and mocked him. He withheld his power and sacrificed himself for our sake. This is the posture we must take with our own brokenness, failure, and pain, all of which attempt to derail our accepting compassion from God. He is able to heal our wounds if we ask and cooperate with him. We humble ourselves to accept his humbled and humbling love.

When we bring God our brokenness, he does not laugh or frown. Psalm 51:17 says, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." To *continually practice* returning to God is vital to this project. If we do not listen to God, we inevitably listen to someone else. Is the object of my trust, trustworthy? God alone is ultimately trustworthy, and he brings peace and certainty.

This project recognized that it is common for a Christian to be managing multiple fronts of their personhood simultaneously. For this reason, a multifaceted and interdisciplinary approach was necessary to address the various parts of each person

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[14] "For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers." Heb. 2:11.

[15] "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." John 14:27.

including the physical, emotional, volitional, and spiritual components. One becomes a disciple to the degree that he or she submits to God in every area of his or life.

Participants worked through the non-negotiables in their lives for the purpose of intentional stewardship. For example, every person already has a spiritual director and a worship director in their lives. They are already proclaiming a gospel of some sort and already have role models. But are these what they truly want to follow? Everyone already has a systematic and practical theology and is living out of these, however, they might not know what these are specifically without ruthless and non-judgmental observation. Where did each person functionally place their hope today? Is one's "held doctrine" the same as their "embodied functionality?" The presupposition being that all people act out of what they believe. They just might not believe what they think they do.

Humans need constant reminding of who they are after being brought into God's family. "Remembering" is a primary theme of the Hebrew Scriptures and is still a major theme for Christians today. For instance, Jesus asks us to remember him in taking communion (Luke 22:19).[16] Humans are easily distracted creatures who are prone to wander. The GSE is an embodied practical reminder of where we direct our worship by examining one's images of God and self daily. This will be an individual liturgy for Lent in 2023. Christians practice wisdom by being with God *before* they do anything for God, lest they confuse his desires with their own.

Another goal of the GSE was to expand awareness for Christians of the Holy Spirit's presence in a moment-by-moment way that would transform them. By practicing the GSE for a few days or weeks, the participants would come to recognize the Holy

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[16] "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Luke 22:17.

Spirit's presence in everyday life with increasing frequency. Hopefully this would affect their families and coworkers, and eventually spread to all who know them. Revival would be amazing, but this project is not concerned with forcing outcomes that the Holy Spirit alone is capable of. Instead, this project was concerned with building the altar that only the Holy Spirit can ignite. While we cannot force revival, we can work and change our own relationship with God to become more connected in a moment-by-moment relationship with him.

Conclusion

This synergy has shown that as I pivot from topic to thesis, there are many potential ways I might serve SDPC and work to further God's kingdom. However, when pairing my unique story with SDPC, this project was developed to focus on individual identity as viewed through one's images of God and self. The GSE flowed naturally out of the *Abide* group as a tool that does not require my physical presence.

The GSE is a tool that was designed for those who are willing to listen for, and follow, the Holy Spirit's voice. Participants will be able to admit when they are wrong and must be willing to be honest with themselves and God. Seeing self-deception being dealt with in a consistent manner in the *Abide* group encouraged me to try and adapt the same sorts of materials for the GSE. Holy Spirit breakthroughs are from God, but specific questions and consistent time spent with God increase one's opportunity for hearing the Holy Spirit's voice.

The GSE empowers those who desire to shape their spiritual posture into what would please God. Prayer and meditation are two of the major ways in which *transformation* and not just absorbing *information* will be used for rebuilding individuals' lives. Biblical wisdom is knowledge from God that shapes one's motivations and actions, causing one to live differently.

It is important to be clear that change is a longer process than we might prefer. Education in the United States generally takes sixteen years to get a bachelor's degree. Education and formation for those who follow Christ takes an entire lifetime. Though there are milestones (*kairos* moments) there is no "graduation," because Christianity is based in a relationship. Patience will be stressed as part of the aspect of self-compassion in one's spiritual posture.

The presenting problem for this project was a lack of identity formation in SDPC congregants. The hypothesis was that doing the GSE during Lent of 2023 would increase the participant's awareness of his or her identity "in Christ," and increase their experience of peace. This would facilitate growth and wholeness in the participants. The goal of this project was to have compassion for the participants while firmly but gently addressing the mistaken identities that they are living out of. The GSE would reveal how those images had prevented God's power from entering their lives. The participant would then utilize a life-giving image of God to abide in Christ. This project affirms the words of Peter in John 6:68-69 to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

This chapter examines John 15:5, where Jesus declares, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."[1] The argument of this study is that by understanding one's identity as a branch through connection with Jesus as the true vine, one will grow in deeper relationship with God. Transformation will take place in the individual through understanding oneself as attached to God through Jesus and his righteousness.

A person's identity determines their goals in life and the purpose for which he or she lives. One's telos helps determines one's praxis. Identity in Jesus leads to bearing eternal fruit, which glorifies God the Father. If Jesus is *the* true vine, then all others are, in the end, false. The result of connection with Jesus is, "that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11).

This paper hypothesizes that by addressing one's identity, transformation might take place that will reframe an individual's relationship with Jesus Christ. One way to view one's identity is by the various images of God and self that a person uses. This reframing (i.e., different perspective and understanding) will lead to changed behavior that works in cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

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[1] John 15:5, English Standard Version. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this document are from the ESV.

This paper proposes that John 15:5 is one of many keys to understanding the Biblical relationship between God and humanity, albeit one of the most vital. The vine and branches image maps out the life of a follower of God in a unique way. A person's identity inevitably leads them to worship and give "worth-ship," or value and priority, to something. This paper presupposes that humans are non-stop, glory-giving entities who engage in unceasing worship.[2] It is a non-negotiable for a creature made in the image of God to worship and give glory to someone or something. God does this himself in the form of the trinity, giving one another deference, glory, and love in the divine dance of *perichoresis*. This relational dance involves both mutual indwelling and interpenetration, two themes that uniquely culminate in the vine and branches imagery.

John 15:5 identifies Jesus (the true vine), his disciples (dependent branches), the nature of their relationship (abiding and authoritatively established by Jesus), the result (fruit that glorifies the Father), and the type of fruit created (eternal and imprinted with God's character).

John 15:5 fits into John's gospel and scripture as a whole. John explicitly states his purpose in 20:31, which says, "…these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." The author's rationale frames the *vine and branches* metaphor of 15:5. Jesus's teaching in 15:5 reveals one of his word pictures for communicating who *he is* and who *his followers are in relation to him*. This is *good news* (i.e., gospel) for those who are seeking to follow God. It takes pressure off the dependent branches and instead declares that the vine and

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[2] Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

vinedresser are responsible for the growth and bearing of fruit. This imagery teaches that a disciple's goal is to remain in Christ. If they do, fruit is inevitably produced.

Before seeking understanding for today's context, it is important to understand the context between Jesus and his original audience 20 centuries ago. The body of the paper will examine how Israel failed to be the vine that God desired and, instead, how Jesus lived out God the Father's desire for humanity to flourish and live in intimacy with him. At the end of the pericope that contains the vine and branches imagery (John 15:1-17), Jesus describes the kind of fruit produced in verse 16, "fruit that will last" (NIV, NRSV), "fruit that remains" (NET), or "that your fruit should abide" (ESV). Earlier in 15:8, Jesus states that, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit." Two characteristics of this fruit are eternality and glory to God the Father.

This paper will treat the exegesis of John 15:5 in *synchronic* (considering the text in its final form) and *existential* (personal engagement with the text) approaches, with a hermeneutic of consent and trust.[3] The end of all exegesis is to determine how God's word will affect the lives of those who claim to follow Christ in their particular context. Whatever was recorded in the Bible has intended consequences for its hearers and readers. John's gospel shows Jesus clearly presenting himself as the fulfillment of OT prophecy as the Messiah.

The major themes for this paper that will be explored are: identity of God the Father, Jesus, and the disciples; the seven "I am" statements of Jesus that culminate in the vine and branches metaphor; the method and benefits of abiding in Jesus, including love

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[3] Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2009), 13-23.

and obedience; the meaning and practice of two Greek words *meno* ("remain" or "abide") and *karpos* ("fruit") found in John 15:5; and an examination of pneumatology, which entails disciples being sent out with peace, friendship, and joy. These themes take place in the context of participation in God's mission as Christ did through obedience and love, which bring peace and joy. All these components fit together through the lens of identity as the vine and branches.

An Examination of the Original Context, Writer, and Audience

This book was written by the apostle John, son of Zebedee, one of the original twelve disciples. It was likely written near the end of the 1st century to an audience of both Jews and Gentiles, as it explains some geography, customs, and even translates Aramaic into Greek for the reader (1:38). Jesus, being presented as the "Word" (Gk. *logos*), demonstrates that John was addressing his gospel presentation against Stoicism and early Gnosticism.

John's evangelistic purpose seeks to persuade his readers and listeners of Jesus' messianic identity by appealing to Jesus' miracles, signs, and teachings. Therefore, what John chose to include yields innumerable theological points. One significant point is that John's book falls into the *gospel* genre because it transmits information about Jesus as Messiah. For this section of scripture (primarily John 15:1-17), this means that Jesus' claim to be the true vine necessarily implies that other false gospels and false vines are present. Jesus (and John) shows the falseness of these other gospels and vines by allowing Jesus to define what the true vine *ought* to produce. That is, branches attached to the true vine produce fruit that is eternal and glorifies the Father.

Jesus, the living Word, was saturated with the Hebrew Bible and both quoted it and made allusions to it frequently. This paper cannot go through all the OT references of Israel being referred to as a vine, but Psalm 80 is an example of a song pleading for God to save the "vine out of Egypt" (v. 8). The "vineyard songs" of Isaiah refer to Israel, God's covenant people, as "wild grapes" (ESV), "bad fruit" (NIV), or "bitter" (NLT) (Isa. 5:2), whereas to contrast, Jesus submits in obedience to the Father who sent him. The vineyard of Isaiah 5:5 is devoured, trampled, and made into a waste. Jesus will succeed where Israel has failed.

God speaks rhetorically in Jeremiah 2:21: "Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?" Jeremiah 12:10-13 speaks about the vineyard, which will "profit nothing" (v. 13). This is analogous to a branch that is useless and, therefore, discarded (John 15:6). Beasley and Murray note that it is conspicuous that whenever Israel is referenced as a vine in the Hebrew Bible, "the nation is set under the judgment of God for its corruption, sometimes explicitly for its failure to produce good fruit" (e.g., Isa. 5:1-7; Jer. 2:21).[4] Jesus addresses this failure to produce fruit through his love, obedience, and remaining in the Father. Note the end of the preceding chapter in John 14:31 before the pericope for this paper, where Jesus says, "I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father." Obedience is part of what Jesus is modeling for his disciples then and for followers of Christ today.

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[4] George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary: John: Volume 36: Second Edition* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 272.

The next theological point is that this vine and branches image, along with the original Greek word *meno* (translated as "abide" or "remain"), speak directly to the idea of identity. Jesus says his followers are ontologically connected the way a vine and branch are connected. This allows discipleship (Gk. *mathetes*), which means "learner." Christ has modeled the ideal humanity for his disciples to imitate, as a branch imitates the vine. The non-negotiable aspect of humans to glorify something or someone is addressed negatively as idolatry by John (as other false gospels) and positively by Jesus (as his being the one true vine).

It is essential to look at Jesus's understanding of God the Father, who oversees this entire illustration (15:1) as the "vinedresser" (ESV, NASB), "gardener" (NET, NLT), or "vinegrower" (NRSV). In John 15:2, Jesus is dependent upon the Father's cultivation of his life. The branches and vine work together to make the fruit by which the Vinedresser is glorified, and Christ submits to the Father's commands (John 12:49-50; 14:31). This is the Vinedresser's vineyard, and everything takes place inside of it. Jesus said, "Whoever believe in me believes not in me but in him who sent me" (John 14:44). Jesus' own understanding of who he is in his relationship to God the Father is one of submission and obedience ("…what I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me" 12:50b). Jesus understands ("stands under") the knowledge that he is absolutely connected to the Father. This knowledge empowers him to live in obedience and love to the Father's mission. Jesus' disciples can have this same security and identity today.

The first half of John (chapters 1-12) has been called the *Book of Signs* (i.e., linking teaching and miracles) and takes place over a period of years. Chapters 12-17 take place over a matter of hours and culminate in the high priestly prayer of chapter 17.

The second half of John (chapters 13-21) is called the *Book of Glory*, as it focuses on Jesus's final upper room discourse and leads into his passion, trial, death, and resurrection. John's gospel is an artistic expression of literary motifs, such as repetition of numbers, misunderstood statements, and extreme contrasts found throughout.

In this work, Jesus is teaching a framework of identity to his disciples. Jesus used this "vine and branches" imagery intentionally. Some scholars suggest that Jesus and the 11 disciples have finished the last supper and are walking through fields when John 15 takes place. While walking, Jesus sees a vineyard and uses it as an illustration, as John 18:1 indicates they are going out across the Kidron.

"I Am" Statements

In the seven "I am" statements in John's gospel, John is building a particular theology that focuses on Jesus' identity. Each "I am" statement is both didactic and polarizing, and all seven force the audience to accept or reject what Jesus claims. The vine and branches of chapter 15 are the final "I am" statement, and this claim presents unique characteristics not found in the other teachings. Jesus' assertions about his identity can be seen in each of these particular claims. When John recorded these statements with the Holy Spirit's guidance, he was building a case for Jesus's divinity.

First, if Jesus is the bread of life (John 6:35, 41, 48, 51), one must "consume" him to live. Bread was a common synecdoche for sustenance. Second, if Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12), then Christ offers a way out of darkness. Knowing Jesus personally will illuminate a person's path in life. Third, if Jesus is the door, then one must pass through him to find safety and pasture (John 10:7, 9). Note that a door can keep

people out or keep people in, depending on which side they are on. Fourth, if Jesus is the good shepherd (John 10:11, 14), then the person represented as sheep will be protected and cared for by the shepherd. The sheep are directed by the shepherd and know his voice (John 10:4). Fifth, if Jesus is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25), then death will not stop Jesus or those who remain in him. This "I am" statement takes place at the resurrection of Lazarus and is one of the strongest statements of divinity that Jesus makes. Sixth, if Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), then he leads those who follow him to eternal life and communion with God the Father. This *way* leads to rest, peace, and joy in God's presence forever. Jesus's word is truth and supplants any former revelation from God up to this point by fulfilling the law and prophecies revealed in the OT. Further, Jesus as *the truth* is reality, existentially speaking. Reality has substance and lasts. This resonates with the idea of the eternality of the fruit produced by the branches. If there is a God, he would define reality and truth. Jesus as *life* reinforces the idea that he is the singular savior who leads to the Father (John 14:6) and that to know Jesus is equally to know the Father (John 14:7). Seventh, if Jesus is the true vine (John 15:1, 5), then branches that are attached to him will inevitably produce fruit. Being attached to Jesus in this way is personal, interdependent, and overseen by God the Father himself.

For Christ to say he is the *true* vine and his disciples are the branches shows that all other vines are *false.* Only identity found through attachment to Christ will be able to produce the type of fruit that glorifies God the Father and is eternal by its association with the true vine. Christ says in John 15:10 that "if you keep my commandments, you

will abide in my love," so one sees that obedience is the method of staying attached to the true vine.

Jesus claims he is "*the* true vine," not "*a* true vine." This resonates with the other "I am" statements, such as "I am *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life," not "*a* way, *a* truth, and *one of many ways* to life." Jesus is acknowledging that people are following other vines that are false. His grammatical choice of the *definite* article "the" makes evident that Jesus claims he is both knowable and exclusive. Using the *indefinite* article "a" would leave Jesus' claims open to both pluralism and relativism, as "*a* way" necessarily means multiple ways.

However, in his work, Raymond E. Brown pushes against this idea, writing: "On a secondary level there may not be by implication a reference to a false vine." His primary stance is that this passage is *not* a polemic "against a false vine." Instead, Brown concludes that this pericope is about "emphasizing that he [Jesus] is the source of 'real' life, a life that can come only from above and from the Father."[5]

Brown is basing this on the translation of the Greek *alethinos* as "real" rather than "truthful." The Greek New Testament uses *alethinos* twenty-eight times, and the NET translation breakdown is as follows: "true" twenty-six times, "accurate" once, and "sincere" once. Brown goes on to suggest that "occasionally the contrast in 'real' is not only heavenly vs. earthly but also NT vs. OT (or Christian vs. Jewish), for example, in the instance of the bread from heaven or manna."[6]

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[5] Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 674.

[6] Brown, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, 674.

The use of the vine, branches, and fruit indicates that John was familiar with the Jewish understanding of Israel as being the fulfillment of promise from YHWH. Is this a polemic against the Synagogue of the Jews or their leaders? Perhaps, but in John 4:22, Jesus says, "Salvation is from the Jews." The real question is what did Jesus mean for his disciples to understand by this use of the adjective *alethinos*? Did he mean "real" or "true?"

As this paper is operating in synchronic and existential exegesis, the argument breaks down into semantics. The use of *alethinos* as "real" *or* "true" is not the point. The point is that Jesus is *both* "real" *and* "true." St. Augustine sums it up in his epigram, "Aut vitas, aut ignis," which translates as "The Vine or the Fire." Every person will come to a decision about who Jesus claims to be. This personal decision ought not to be based on what other people have said but rather on what Jesus said about who he was *himself*, namely, the true vine whose Father was the Vinedresser. This is a disputative claim about Jesus being divine. This non-negotiable decision about who Jesus claims to be *will* be made one way or another. This forces the issue of self-awareness regarding what a person gives glory to. Is it Jesus or anything else?

John Calvin summarizes this point, writing that Jesus means, "I am *truly* the vine, and people who seek strength anywhere else are working in vain. Useful fruit will come only from the branches produced by me."[7] This is a helpful commentary so long as it is remembered that "useful fruit" is defined according to the rubric set forth by Jesus in 15:8 – that is, fruit that glorifies the Father.

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[7] Jean Calvin, *John* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 353.

John 15:5, taken in light of John's evangelistic intentions, is underlined by the two uses of the root word *believe* (Gk. *pisteou*) in John 20:31, and the order is important. First, John writes to convince readers that "Jesus is the Christ." Second, he writes "that by believing you may have life in his name." Faith in Christ is antecedent to life in his name. The *true vine* metaphor is crucial to John's gospel, as seen in its placement in the "I am" statements. The vine and branches culminate in the identification of Jesus as the Messiah who saves and glorifies God the Father.

The interconnected and continuous nature of vines and branches makes it difficult to know exactly where a vine starts and ends and where a branch starts and ends. They intermingle, though the branch is always the outermost and newest part of the plant, which is also the location of fruit production. The exterior of the plant shows where the branch splits off from the vine, but *inside* of the plant, there is a continuous flow of energy and life-giving vitality.

Branches are typical of the vine to which they are attached. The communicable aspects of being a creature made in God's image meant that abiding was both possible and necessary to please God. This is a continuation of God's plan that was interrupted by sin and the fall of humanity in the garden of Eden.

Methods and Benefits of Abiding in Jesus: Love and Obedience

Jesus likens his disciples to himself, in that they are like branches to a vine. However, Christ is the vine, and the disciples are not; there is differentiation between the two. There is a reinstitution of love and obedience, two of the major themes of John 15:1-17, as they existed before Adam and Eve's fall from grace.

Other scripture speaks of Gentiles being "grafted in" (Romans 11:13-24), and verse 22 states, "Provided you continue in his [God's] kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off." The Greek word translated here for "continue" is *epimeno,* which can also be translated to "remain" and contains the root *meno*. This is parallel to the teaching we see in John 15 of abiding.

Humans are not self-created beings. They have a starting point in time and space. When Jesus says that he is the vine and we are the branches, he describes an *inter-dependent, inter-penetration* in the relationship between himself and those who abide in him. This is the most organic and interdependent of all the "I am" statements.

This interpenetration and intermingling of substance and identity with God is particularly stressed in the Orthodox tradition, which has *theosis* (*divinization*) as its goal.[8] Sanford suggests that John is using symbolic language in this passage to teach "one of the most important passages in the Bible for the idea of deification."[9] It is not the purview of this paper to explore divinization but to observe that a branch's identity is wrapped up with the vine.

Recognizing these identity markers, both for Jesus' disciples and readers today, allows one to make some theological claims. First, Christians are *positionally* dependent upon God as branches. Second, eternality is based upon attachment to God himself, and anything that lasts will be somehow linked to God. One must be careful to not go further than the text in this section of John. There are other sections of Scripture that speak about

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[8] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 154.

[9] John Sanford, *A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 279.

the eternality of certain things, but for this paper, when thinking about identity and idolatry, one observes there is a non-negotiable exclusivity that Jesus lays claim to. Because Jesus claims that he is the *true vine*, he is implicitly stating that all other vines are idolatrous and *false*.[10]

One observes the vine and branches of John 15:5 as unique and ultimately hope-filled as Jesus states that joy will follow. In the pericope of 15:1-17, one reads of the identity of Jesus, God the Father, and the disciples. The telos that God the Father has for the vine and branches is joy and fruit through love and obedience.

Meno* and *Karpos

Two of the key words used in John 15:5 are *meno* and *karpos*. These words show how the vine and branches relate (*meno*) and what the outcome of this connection will be (*karpos*). One of the ways scripture engages with itself is when a dialogue takes place between two different words, verses, pericopes, and books of the Bible. By comparing and contrasting, one gains a fuller understanding of what is being communicated.

The Greek word *meno* (generally translated as *abide* or *remain*) is used eleven times in John 15:1-17. Of those eleven instances, only two are imperatives (i.e., used to convey an authoritative command). Those two times are verse 4, where Jesus says, "abide in me," and in verse 9, where Jesus says to "abide in my love." These are instructions from Jesus to his disciples. Throughout this discourse, Jesus flows back and forth between himself, his word, and his love, but the idea is the same: unless one continues to

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[10] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 115-116.

return to Jesus and his love for the life-giving nutrition the true vine provides, one will wither, not bear fruit, and be cast away.

These two imperative uses of *meno* stress the importance of *continuing* one's walk with Jesus in life. Jesus' disciples are not called to just become a part of the vine by name only; instead, they must participate in God's mission and bear fruit through the power of the vine and under the attendance of the vinedresser. The disciple's identity must have been constantly threatened, or it would not be so important to stress the idea of remaining in the true vine. Jesus's emphasizing the *meno* aspect of the metaphor reveals much of what the Vinedresser's expectations are for the vine and branches.

The Greek word *karpos* translates as "fruit." Apart from the eight times it is used in John 15:2-16, *karpos* is only used two other times in this gospel, both of which are in Jesus' words. The first occurrence, in John 4:36, says, "Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering *fruit* for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together" (emphasis added). Note the presence of rejoicing in community with the harvesting of this fruit! This speaks to the shared mission of God with humanity. The second instance of *karpos* is in John 12:24 when Jesus states: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much *fruit*" (emphasis added). Jesus describes the sort of obedience that he himself is entering, as well as how his followers (branches) will participate in their own deaths and even in his death (John 12:25-26).

Even bearing the smallest amount of fruit reveals connection to Christ. It is not the amount of fruit that matters. Rather, it is the presence of fruit, period. Every disciple of Jesus has a different path in some ways that is unique to himself or herself. Peter

wanted to know what Jesus intended to do with John, and Jesus essentially told Peter to mind his own business (John 21:21-22). Christians are not to judge what God does, and each true branch will bear fruit in the place that God has placed them.

Consider also the parable in Matthew 13:1-23, where some seeds produced thirtyfold, some sixtyfold, and some a hundredfold. The Vinedresser will work the branches as he sees fit. The branch does not dictate how fruitful it is in itself. True branches glorify God the Father through obedience and love. It is important to see the order of these as being caused by God, not by anything a branch can do on its own. The concentration and emphasis for *meno* and *karpos* in the pericope of John 15:1-17 is remarkable. Jesus is straining to emphasize these two ideas as strongly as possible.

Consider one additional contextual reference other than the use of *karpos* in John. Paul uses this word just once in Galatians (5:22-23) in the famous exposition of the fruit of the Spirit: “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” These are family characteristics for those who have the Biblical God as their Father. They are unavailable, in the biblical sense of eternal fruit, to those who are not linked with Christ. This exclusivity is one of the primary ideas behind what Jesus Christ means when he says he is the *true vine* that bears true fruit. These are the changes that branches can expect to see in their lives as they grow in their attachment to Jesus.

Jesus maintains distinctions in his word picture. The vine is *attached to* and *provides nourishment for* the branches, but *is not* the branches. The branches are dependent upon the vine for sustenance. Christians increasingly bear fruit through sanctification (Gal. 5:22-23) as they become more *Christ-like*, though they never *become* the Christ. Jesus’s individuation between himself and the Father models the

differentiation between vine and branches as inter-dependent. This divergence speaks to the communicable aspects of a creature who is made in God's image (*Imago Dei*) and of the uniquely divine (i.e., incommunicable) characteristics of God himself.

Pneumatology

The last section of this paper will examine two pericopes related to pneumatology as they intersect with abiding in the true vine. In John 20:21-22, Jesus says, "'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" Consider this alongside John 14:26-27, where Jesus promises that the Father will send "the Helper, the Holy Spirit" and states that "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." Peace is mentioned in both passages alongside the receiving of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus reassures the disciples of this peace, commanding them to "let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27). This contains an imperative verb from Jesus (Gk. *tarasso*), which literally translates as "let not your heart be agitated (or stirred)." In this *abiding* connection Jesus has already left *his* peace. The disciples need to learn to control *their* fear *with the Holy Spirit*. Fear may be present, but God is greater than the world and a believer's emotions. This is a picture of working out faith and a practical application for Christians across all time. In fact, Jesus promises trouble in this world but assures the disciples that "in me you may have peace" and that "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Jesus explains how to do so in John 14:26, stating:

"He [the Helper] will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." The mysterious Holy Spirit (John 3:8), will cause the disciples to remember.

Note that "*re*-membering" can only occur if it was there in the first place and then forgotten. One cannot remember what one does not forget. This means Christians are to meditate upon and drill the gospel (and scriptures) deep into their minds and hearts (Ps. 1:2; Josh. 1:8). Jesus reminds his disciples that this is not just information for their heads but *formation* for their embodied actions. He states, "*If* you know these things, blessed are you *if you do them*" (emphasis added, John 13:17), after washing the disciple's feet.

There are many "if" statements from Jesus that are often only partially stated. It is common to hear, "The truth will set you free" without the beginning of that verse in John 8:32. "*If* you continue to follow my teaching, you are really my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (emphasis added). If the disciples are following Jesus, accepting the peace of the Holy Spirit, and accepting their identities of being sent by the vine, then idolatries in their lives will continue to be dealt with as they remember and work their fears out in faith. Disciples *continue* to follow Christ's teachings as a branch continues in its attachment to the vine.

In 2nd John 9, the author restates what it means to *abide*: "Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and Son." This reemphasizes what Jesus says in John 15:7: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Jesus explicitly uses the word "if" to show the conditionality of his statement, whereas John's epistle states that abiding in the teaching of Christ is linked with possession of God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. This language reveals the

dual claims that each part of the relationship has on the other. In fact, the Greek word commonly translated "if" (*ean*) is used seven times in the pericope of John 15:1-17. The disciples need peace and the Holy Spirit because they are being sent. Jesus says in John 20:21 *after* giving them his peace, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." Sending happens after equipping.

John is speaking about what theologians would later call the *processio Dei* (procession of God) and the *missio Dei* (mission of God). While separate, these two terms are related. *Processio* refers to the ontological nature of God (his identity) from which naturally comes the *missio*, or mission of God (his operating in the world and history). Jesus uses this language in John 14:10 (and John 12:49-50) when he says, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works." The Trinity exists in "mutual indwelling and interpenetration."[11] By seeing how disciples are incorporated into the *processio Dei*, they can understand how to participate in the *missio Dei*. Again, identity is an antecedent to any kind of participation in mission.

This important aspect of the vine and branches imagery speaks to *perichoresis* – that is, "reciprocity, interchange, giving to and receiving from one another, being drawn to one another and contented in the other, interpenetrating on another by drawing life from and pouring life into one another as a fellowship of love."[12] This is the true life from the true vine that Jesus invites his disciples into. Another example is in John 13:20, where

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[11] Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 141.

[12] Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God*, 142.

Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” This describes both the *sent-ness* of Jesus and the connection with God the Father. Notice that the Holy Spirit is with the disciples and that “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14:20). There is a chain of relationship being highlighted in these verses: Jesus being sent by the Father and Jesus sending the disciples with the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the Holy Spirit and peace (John 14:26-27; 20:21-22), the status of friendship (as opposed to the former status of servant seen in John 15:14-15), and joy (John 15:11) are all parts of being a branch connected to the true vine. However, these can only come by accepting Jesus’s claim of identity and participating in God’s mission while relinquishing one’s own tiny kingdom of self.

In summary, identity, whether in Christ or apart from him, is what will shape and drive a person’s life. John 15:5 provides one critical image of what it means to be connected to Jesus. The vine and branches metaphor provides a new, organically connected image in a way the previous “I am” statements do not. This is *intimacy* with God, not just nominal connection. This is *authentic attachment,* not just an impersonal business relationship. To put it starkly, if one is not connected to Jesus Christ in a life-sustaining way (internally and not just externally nominal), then one is either dead or will be soon. Christians must live by the words of Christ while seeking understanding and wrestling with their mind, heart, and will, all under the watchful eye of God, through the work of Christ, and by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Becoming a follower of Christ means becoming a part of his family.

Just as the Trinity moves as one unit while maintaining distinctions of person, Jesus as the vine and his disciples as the branches are purposeful in their goal of bearing fruit while preserving distinct identities. Jesus Christ was the *living Word* (John 1:1, 14), and those who follow him are *living exegesis* of his words and him as *the* Word (Gk. *logos*).

One practical theological application is that disciples of Christ will be regularly consuming Christ's words. It is part of a spiritual diet to consume spiritually sustaining food regularly. The Word of God is true bread (Matt. 4:4). Disciples will continually seek sustenance and satiation from Christ above all other sources.

Further, Leon Morris writes: "The fruit of Christian service is never the result of allowing the natural energies and inclinations to run riot."[13] Stewardship for the Christian means having a way of being in the world. It is a non-negotiable to have a plan, even if one is unaware of what the plan might be. Intentionality is necessary for wise stewardship of God's peace. Information is not transformation. Knowledge is necessary for the disciple to be obedient, but knowing and doing (word and deed, information, and practice) are overlapping yet distinct.

Twenty-first century American culture is emerging from a rational solipsism, the reduction of life to material existence. "Spiritual but not Religious" and the rise of *moralistic therapeutic deism* show the continued search by humans for the divine. There is increasingly a rejection of the view that materiality is all there is. One sees a rise in activities in society through bodily experiences that change one's consciousness, such as

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[13] Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John: Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 594.

alcoholism, drug addiction, and sex addiction. These behaviors are seeking ecstasy, derived from the Greek *exstasis*, which means, "getting out of oneself."[14]

Jesus's vine and branches image offers a way to "get out of oneself," though probably not as most people would imagine or desire. People have always struggled with the person of Jesus, because to accept him as Savior and Lord would mean to die to oneself. This happens by admitting and accepting that he or she is not the Vinedresser, or even the vine, but rather the branch. Jesus offers so much more than merely "getting out of oneself." He offers belonging and love as friends (John 15:13-15). Jesus offers peace and joy through participation in God's story of reality.

Jude 21 sums up the entire idea of this paper in saying, "Keep yourselves in the love of God." Branches stay connected internally, and God will cause the fruit to grow. Consider 1 Corinthians 3:6-7, where Paul writes, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."

Conclusion: Focus on Identity

There are countless ways to interpret John 15:5 and its surrounding context. This paper does not claim to be the only interpretation and pushes against a "binary consciousness."[15] Instead, this paper focuses on the idea of *identity* and how it might inform re-framing and discipleship in the DMin project. Just as Jesus understood himself

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[14] Sanford, *A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 284-285.

[15] Frederick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 209.

in relation to God the Father as being the foundation to his mission, so too his disciples are to imitate this pattern. Jesus had patterns disciples today should imitate (Luke 5:16).

Last, love plays a role. *Agape* and another word with the same root, *agapao*, are used eight times in John 15:1-17. Obedience was discussed above as showing one's connection to Jesus, but love is the other half of this teaching. They are linked together and stay in tension while equally true, which is part of what makes Christianity and the Biblical God so incredible.

Christians and the church struggle to achieve this impossible task on their own, but branches are not made to do this on their own. Branches are made to flourish when attached to a vine. The Holy Spirit desires to help bring about God's kingdom here today, but often Jesus's disciples have their own idea about how that should look.

Only obedience with love is truly obedience, and only love with obedience is truly love, biblically speaking. Otherwise, love becomes licentiousness or obedience becomes legalism. Together, they work to bring about transformation in a way that they could not individually. Likewise, individuals, churches, and denominations often operate out of *either* grace (which can lead to relativism) *or* faith (which can lead to legalism). The project will hold these dichotomies in tension simultaneously.

The vine and branches metaphor is a powerful image of identity and appropriate relationship as defined by Jesus. The far-reaching implications of this metaphor address idolatry through discipleship, taking place through love and obedience. John's evangelistic thrust is achieved when a person accepts their identity as a branch attached to the true vine instead of to a false one. This leads to communion (peace) and intimacy (joy) with God. Christians are branches who were never intended to be the Gardeners or

the true vine. Thank God the Vinedresser for who he is in himself and his love towards those who remain in him and obey him!

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

This paper will examine the movement of Devotio Moderna (DM) in several ways. First, it will investigate the history of DM with a focus on Gerard Groote, the founder of the *Brotherhood (and Sisterhood) of Common Life* (also referred to as the *Brethren* and the *Devout*), which was a smaller movement in its own right during the time of DM. Second, it will do so by considering the scholar John Van Engen's summation of DM practitioners. Third, it will examine Devotio Moderna through the framework of Anthony F. C. Wallace, who established stages that scrutinized and appraised various *Revitalization Movements* of the past, particularly those with a religious aspect. Taken together these explorations will offer contributions to the DMin project.

Two core themes of this DMin project are (1) identity, defined as people's image of themselves and God, and (2) worship disorders, defined as repentance addressing idolatry in one's life and focusing instead on a life of obedience to God instead of self. This paper's analysis is that adherents of DM pursued flourishing by carefully structuring circumstances in their lives that they could control. This led to increased space for God to enter into the areas that they could *not* control. This required self-awareness, humility, an ability to accept failures, patience, and perseverance. Their practices, habits, and identities were shaped by their image of God. The issue of worship disorders was addressed by the constant questioning of and focus on the presence of God in every

circumstance. DM practitioners lived in a moment-by-moment awareness of God's presence in their lives and trained themselves to recognize when they were keeping God away from parts of their heart. Likewise, people today can focus and design their lives around their chosen values in a particular spiritual posture. This might mean drastic changes for some people who have not set boundaries on their hearts, minds, emotions, money, or time.

Devotio Moderna: A History

Devotio Moderna originated in the mid-late fourteenth century (approximately 1370) in the Netherlands and spread to other neighboring countries. The thrust of the movement at its core was the direction of individuals in "reformation of the soul and the rejuvenation of the spirit as the basis for renewal of the communal life, whether within or outside monastic walls."[1] Groote and the *Brethren* were only one expression of DM at the time. There are varying perspectives from Church historians as to whether this movement was more characterized as a "semireligious" or "lay movement" or whether it was distinguished by its adherents bringing together the layperson and religious communities.[2]

Due to the number of conjectures and lack of clear evidence, this paper acknowledges the various expressions of the DM movement based on its composition, location, and time in history. Albert Hyma (1893-1978), a scholar of DM, wrote about

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[1] John Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 2.

[2] Charles Caspers, Daniela Muller, and Judith KeBler, "In the Eyes of Others. The Modern Devotion in Germany and the Netherlands: Influencing and Appropriating," *Church History and Religious Culture* 93, no. 4 (2013): 489, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23923527.

two prominent Catholics who took exact opposite views on whether DM was, or was not, a precursor to the Reformation. John Van Engen (1947-present) bolsters the multiplicity of views by citing support for pre-Reformation seeds, as many Brethren eventually became priests without showing any signs of "anticlericalism in the Modern Devotion."[3] This was neither a strictly lay movement nor a reform of the (Catholic) Church. The point is that, when attempting to understand history, people often make neat categorizations while ignoring conflicting data. This does not let history speak for itself in its contradictions. There are various perspectives on DM, and this paper is one more, specifically focusing on some DM principles that will be drawn out for this DMin project's application.

When examining primary sources from adherents of the DM movement, such as sections of *The Spiritual Ascents* by Gerard Zerbolt (1367-1398), one observes the author's deep desire to both receive love from God and live in praise and obedience to his Creator. This work contains the themes of the original goodness of man and creation, the powerful and twisting effects of sin, what Jesus Christ did, and what therefore, Zerbolt sees as his privilege, duty, and obedience to God by the way he lived his life.[4] Consider such chapter titles as "A Man Should Order His Heart Differently with Respect to the End and the Means to the End"[5] and "The Three Steps Which Sustain and Advance Spiritual Ascent: Reading, Meditation, and Prayer."[6] Practitioners of DM would likely

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[3] Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna*, 22-23.

[4] Gerard Zerbolt, "The Spiritual Ascents," in *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, trans. John Van Engen (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 245-315.

[5] Zerbolt, "The Spiritual Ascents," 256.

[6] Zerbolt, "The Spiritual Ascents," 286.

praise the NLT translation of Matthew 3:8, which says, “Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God.”

The Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life were a smaller part of the larger DM movement. Gerard Groote (1340-1384) established the *Brethren* after having a conversion experience so overwhelming that he gave away nearly all his belongings (including his house which became the first *Sisters of the Common Life* location) and became an itinerant preacher whose primary message was love and devotion to Christ. DM swept through Europe, particularly in the lowlands (i.e., Netherlands, Belgium, and parts of Germany). The specific origins of DM are debated by scholars, who see multiple confluences reaching a point that changed the tides of culture and society in particular ways at the time. Some attribute Groote with being the founder of the DM movement, and others do not. Regardless of DM’s provenance, for this paper’s purposes, it is crucial to understand that the European zeitgeist was shifting in the common person’s view of themselves, the church, and God. The Church was viewed as corrupt and in need of purification. Many in the church were bureaucrats and intellectuals but spiritually immature or bankrupt. Being in a liminal space was an inherent part of this movement’s power. A time of crisis can be a time of opportunity and change as well.

The Reformation is generally considered to have begun with Martin Luther’s publication of his ninety-five theses in 1517. Previous to that time, the DM movement grew and fluctuated in various forms (as did the Brethren), but the location and passage of time over two centuries was varied. In some contexts, the focus on inward reform was stressed, and in other locations, the restoration of discipline in the monastic life was emphasized. The cultivation of holiness and integrity took place through “piety, lived

faith, humility, and meditation upon Christ's suffering,"[7] whether in private or in public. While surveying over two centuries of DM (in its institutionalized form in the Netherlands), Rudolf van Dijk identifies five major periods with various priorities guiding each interval.[8] DM had stages of infancy, childhood, and adulthood.

One hope of this movement was to reform the Church of its corruptions within leadership. Grundler writes of the *Brethren*: "Ever since the founding of the brotherhood, a major concern of the brethren had been the preparation of young men for the monastic life and for the priesthood."[9] Groote was seeking to reform from inside and outside of the Church, as he was preaching against clergy around the Netherlands while simultaneously starting the Brethren. In the New Devout, there was a mixture of people in preparation for a lifetime of church ministry, and those who lived similar lives but crucially did *not* take monastic vows. If DM could not reform the Church, it would engage and lead people to an understanding of Christianity embraced by previous generations who practiced piety, poverty, and humility.

Some church theories of revitalization have called this a type of "primitivism," understood here as returning to an earlier and "purer" time of Christian practice. The Devout were "recreating the devotional lives of Christ and the apostles in a manner which

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[7] R. Jay Magill, Jr., "Turn Away the World: How a Curious Fifteenth-Century Guidebook Shaped the Contours of the Reformation and Taught Readers to Turn Inward." *Christianity & Literature* 67, issue 1 (December 2017): 34-49, accessed November 29, 2021, https://www.proquest.com/docview/2447102704/abstract/C42403A3217842C8PQ/1?accountid=202487.

[8] Charles Caspers, Daniela Muller, and Judith KeBler, "In the Eyes of Others. The Modern Devotion in Germany and the Netherlands: Influencing and Appropriating," 491.

[9] Otto Grundler, "*Devotio Moderna*," in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 177.

would work for them in their late medieval context."[10] This is one of the ideas that will be explored further for this project in today's context: making the gospel fleshy (i.e. more embodiment and more wholistic) in the 21st century Western context.

Key Terms for Devotio Moderna

Van Engen compiled a list of terms that were found in the adherents of DM. These characteristics form an image of what life might look like for those who chose to practice the four core aspects (as generally agreed upon by scholars) of DM. These core aspects were: (1) Living in Christ; (2) reading scripture; (3) progressing in moral sanctity; and (4) developing interiority.[11] Van Engen found the following terms as themes that were part of the everyday life of those practicing the New Devotion.

A condensed selection of these terms are: *conversio* – the moment of conversion but also the "taking up" of the new life until one's death; *resolutio* – personal, voluntary submission to God's will continuously; *exercitium* – this word was applied to every aspect of life (also called "spiritual training"); *profectus virtutum* – "progress in the virtues" was the clarion call for the brothers and sisters; *charitas* – the type of love described here was "sweet…delightful…bringing peace" and never "ravishing… or self-annihilating"[12]; *humilitas* – humility as the antidote to pride and the foundational principle of DM; *obedientia* – seen as an expression of "break[ing] your own will," which sounds abhorrent in today's individualistic culture, but the Devout understood acceptance of all things, particularly difficulties and suffering, as an expression of faith in

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[10] Mathilde Van Dijk, "The Devotio Moderna, the Emotions and the Search for 'Dutchness,'" *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 129, no. 2 (2014): 28, https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.9540.

[11] Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna,* 27.

[12] Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna,* 31.

God; *cor* – similar to a Jewish understanding of "heart" in the Old Testament, encompassing the mind, passions, and volition, and the innermost part of a person; *affectus (affectio)* – this was a presupposition that affections were an inevitable part of being human, thus the idea was to intentionally "cultivate the right kinds of affections and impulses, desire for God and delight in the good"; and *Puritas cordis* – which translates as "purity of heart" and summarized the goal of all the traits above.[13] To cultivate these characteristics was to lead to the fullest possible life with God. Jesus says in Matthew 5:8, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."[14]

Initially, due to many of DMs' devotees coming from financially prosperous backgrounds, arrogance and self-assertion were common. Embracing the characteristics above would require great humility, a community of like-minded practitioners for encouragement and edification, and patience. To live in one of the Brother or Sister houses was to effectively reject any former privileges of their socio-economic background.

With these characteristics or any of the other numerous traits of the New Devout, one can see an embodied working out of one's identity as understood by God. The Devout wanted to have their beliefs match their lives. They took responsibility for their thoughts, emotions, and actions seriously. The partial and selective list from Van Engen focused on specific themes, and there will need to be wisdom in using these and discovering others for today's context. These are the "core values" of an individual that determine one's path.

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[13] Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna,* 27-34.

[14] Matthew 5:8, English Standard Version. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this document are from the ESV.

Patterns in Devotio Moderna

DM can be considered through the patterns observed by Anthony F. C. Wallace in his "Revitalization Movements,"[15] which resonate with this DMin project. Wallace perceived that the root of "revitalization" was found in *dissatisfaction* with the cultural context. This was certainly true for DM. His term "mazeway" (similar to "worldview") was understood as the path leading to change during the growth and life span of a movement.

Wallace postulated that individuals sought to reduce stress in their personal mazeways and would change their entire personhood to reduce these stressors. This is true for groups, subcultures, and movements as well, not just individuals. For the time period of DM, dissatisfaction with the church and the overall circumstance of Europe were both incredibly bleak. Roughly 45-60% of Europe's population had died from the Bubonic plague (1346-1353), which is considered the worst recorded pandemic in human history. The stressors of everyday life drove many people to seek solace in religion. In addition, there were famines, and the 100 Years War (1337-1453) was taking place in France and England.

Today, stressors for the average Western person are abundant. There is more skepticism and distrust of leaders in every arena of life, whether political or religious, than ever before. Epidemics, social and religious unrest, and insecurity are everyday occurrences. The proliferation of non-stop news and social media has led many to

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[15] Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 2 (April 1956): 265, https://www.jstor.org/stable/665488.

depression, anxiety, and an unending dissatisfaction with self and others. The moral order that was generally accepted (if not necessarily agreed with) died with the atrocities of the twentieth century. Today's crises include viruses like COVID-19, the rapid pace of Artificial Intelligence, and the irreversible damage being done to the environment and its lifeforms (such as increasing numbers of extinct species).

Wallace states, "Most denominational and sectarian groups and orders budded or split off after failure to revitalize a traditional institution."[16] The lack of change and reform in the church led people to live out their own image of Christianity in non-monastic settings. The "Official Church" (Roman Catholic) acknowledged the *Brethren* officially in some capacity as in the congregation at Windesheim, located off the river IJssel in the Netherlands. Windesheim was established by Groote's successor Florence Radewyns, on Groote's advice, to gain recognition of the Brethren in the eyes of the church. John à Kempis (the older brother of Thomas), was part of the first set of canons (those who take vows and live communally) who lived there.

The *Brethren* helped shape future reformers. For instance, Martin Luther and Thomas à Kempis both attended Brotherhood houses for education. Thomas à Kempis' The *Imitation of Christ* was one of the primary texts of the mid and latter DM movement and is still read today. Though ultimately unknowable, Kempis is generally considered the author (Constable lists 19 different attributed authors).[17] *The Imitation of Christ* emphasizes self-awareness and attention management used in a person's religious

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[16] Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," 267.

[17] Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Great Britain, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 239.

individualism and has much overlap with DM and the Brethren. Later, the Catholic counter-reformation also used many principles that originated in the *Brethren* and DM.

Following with Wallace's structure of revitalization process, one sees "five somewhat overlapping stages: 1. Steady State; 2. Period of Individual Stress; 3. Period of Cultural Distortion; 4. Period of Revitalization… 5. New Steady State."[18] These provide a framework for understanding DM in its original setting while recognizing parallels for applications today.

First, the *Steady State* was what existed before the crises that precipitated DM and Groote beginning his stand against Church corruption. Without the crises, DM might never have had the impact it did. In our context today, the *Steady State* is expressed in cynicism towards the church and the lack of any clear difference between those who claim to follow Jesus and those who do not. There is dissatisfaction with religion in general. Western culture is inundated with the "spiritual but not religious."

Second, the *Period of Increased Individual Stress* acknowledges that current practices are not adequately addressing and satisfying the people of that era. This is perceived by the distresses that occur in the diminishing returns of efficiency when fulfilling needs (whether perceived or actual). For DM, the common layperson saw and felt the inability of the church to assuage the anxiety and stressors of everyday life. DM practitioners were seeking the primitivism of the previous generation's examples of humility and personal piety in a culture and world that appeared to be deteriorating rapidly. In today's context, the explosion of self-help books, podcasts, and technique-driven-solutions reveal culture's attempt to address the emptiness and discontentment

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[18] Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," 268.

inside of people. Distractions are available and promoted more than ever, while culture convinces many people that it is their life's purpose to subscribe, acquire more, and achieve happiness by any means necessary.

Third, the *Period of Cultural Distortion* describes the various ways people's personalities shapes their response and reaction to the world around them. Some people have higher tolerances for anxiety and stressors than others, but all people must create their own meaning and place in the world. People turn inward and/or outward in "intragroup violence, disregard of kinship and sexual mores… depression and self-reproach, and … a variety of psychosomatic and neurotic disorders."[19] This aligns with what is observable in Western culture today. Many of the coping techniques developed to manage stressors and anxiety become new individual or cultural norms and patterns, eventually developing into a new homeostasis that may or may not be life-giving (in the Christian sense of obedience to God). This stage of revitalization sees people coming to the reality that their internal mazeway is not strong or developed enough to cope with the gap that exists between the desires of their hearts and reality. This dissatisfaction motivates people to change.

Fourth, the *Period of Revitalization* is a crucial timespan where extinction of the society or culture is a real possibility. Wallace claims that Revitalization Movements can engage with and potentially change this impending extinction. The following list of six major tasks are all subdivisions of this fourth stage, the *Period of Revitalization*:

(1) *Mazeway* reformulation – in the case of DM, the return to an earlier and more primal form of Christianity. Groote evidenced some of these changes that Wallace

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[19] Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," 269.

lists, including the "brief and dramatic moment of insight, revelation, or inspiration, which functions in most respects like the … new synthesis of values and meanings."[20];

(2) *Communication* – the spread of the message from the founder or prophet of this new idea;

(3) *Organization* – the structuring of a hierarchy that keeps the founder at the top, leaving disciples and followers beneath. For DM, this involved the rhythms of life that were enjoined onto those seeking a new framework for making sense of the world, whether part of the Brethren or not. For this DMin project, it is important to note that there is a high level of emotional satisfaction found in those who adopt this new mazeway. The idea of personal fulfillment (emotional or otherwise) is currently one of western society's highest values;

(4) *Adaptation* – resistance to the movement found in those currently in power who have something to lose from the new movement. The established church had issued an edict to prevent Groote from preaching, who was calling attention to the corruption of the clergy. Another part of *adaptation* has to do with the modification of various tenets of the original doctrine to make it more palatable for a larger public embrace. This helps explain why DM looked different in various places;

(5) *Cultural Transformation* – if the culture accepts this new religious movement, there will be a reduction of stress and anxiety in individuals, as well as an impact

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[20] Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," 271.

on the culture itself, while the adherents live into their new mazeway and proselytize their beliefs to others; and

(6) *Routinization* – the normalization of the new program for living. What once may have been perceived as radical becomes commonplace.

The final stage in Wallace's structure of revitalization is *The New Steady State.* This is society's acceptance of the movement after having "proved itself viable."[21] This stage is intrinsically different from the original steady state (stage 1) and the stage of cultural distortion (stage 3). While DM reached into the past, reviving early Christian teaching and practice, its application of those points was new. For instance, meditation upon Jesus as the risen Christ has happened since the resurrection, but copying liturgical texts as a form of meditation (a standard practice of DM adherents) to reinforce and retain (i.e., structurally transform one's mind) was a new practice. This was impossible for earlier generations due to their general illiteracy, along with the cost and acquisition of paper.

The Brotherhood and Sisterhood of Common Life offered something for those without specialized education and for those seeking vocation within the church. There was some overlap of resources, such as the six printing presses associated with the Brethren. These created missals and other various books for use in congregations, monasteries, nunneries, and for laypeople as well.[22]

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[21] Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," 275.

[22] Koen Gourdriaan, "The Devotio Moderna and the Printing Press (ca. 1475-1540)," *Church History and Religious Culture* 93, no. 4 (2013): 601, accessed November 30, 2021, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23923531.

The Brethren lived in shared houses and participated in life together, supporting and encouraging one another in not just "spiritual living" but also the cultural, social, and economic development of whatever city in which they were located. One crucial difference between the Brotherhood/Sisterhood and monks/nuns was the absence of vows to any church. The participants were free to come and go to different Brotherhood/Sisterhood houses while engaging in cultural and economic activity. One researcher cites an article stating that the Brotherhood "helped jumpstart capitalism in Europe."[23]

Structure in DM

The *Devotio Moderna* movement was spread in geography and time and covered many different ways in which laypeople committed themselves to God. For this project, the use of structured spiritual discipline will be one of the main components that can be mimicked and utilized today. Intentional community in the structure of the monastic houses records a strict schedule that guided the lives and practices of the adherents. Another compelling (and adaptable) practice was called the *rapiaria* ("notebook"), which was the contemplative reading of scripture, with each person filling their notebook with passages that spoke to them.

Consider person A who wakes up at 3:30 a.m. (such as at Windesheim) and follows a strict schedule of prayer, meditation, mass, copying manuscripts, and vespers. Person B does not. Both persons A and B are being shaped by their actions and choosing

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[23] Magill, Jr., "Turn Away the World: How a Curious Fifteenth-Century Guidebook Shaped the Contours of the Reformation and Taught Readers to Turn Inward," 37.

which environment they are in. Adherents of DM were seeking to follow God in a new way between established and recognized monasteries and the layperson. There was a desire for a deeper life-enriching spiritual life that might exist outside of the corruption in the Church. There was a rejection of most of the Church's rituals (excepting transubstantiation) that were replaced with individual practices. This turning from institutions towards inwardness with Christ has had a long list of followers both before DM and since. If one cannot change the world (including institutions such as the Church), oftentimes people turn inward and change themselves instead. Which is easier: to reform the entire Church or one's own soul?

One idea important for this paper is the stance of DM that the layperson had access to God just as much as the priest in the local church (this doctrine is known as the "priesthood of all believers"). This resonates with many postmodern people today, who value individualism at the cost of missing what gifts community might provide.

DM and the Printing Presses

In an article concerning DM and the advent of the printing press and the relationship between the two, Gourdriaan shows the mixed motives of DM practitioners in their use of this new technology. A similar analog today might be the use of the smart phone and the internet. People have more access to information than at any other time in human history. How will a person know what to live by? The dissemination of information, either true or false (more likely a mixture of the two), is a problem that all humans must struggle with. Is the object of one's trust trustworthy?

Gourdriaan examines the six printing presses associated with the earliest work of the Brethren produced in the incubabula period (referring to the earliest books published)

and the post-incubabula period (ca. 1475-1540). He found 200 printed editions whose type and purpose varied drastically. The Brotherhood printed for themselves and for commercial purposes, and output varied as widely as Latin textbooks, hagiographies, books on law and history, devotionals, and more.[24] By Gourdriaan's breakdown, books of liturgy and devotional and cathectic texts far surpass any other category, including the Bible itself. Hand copying was still part of the Brethren's practice well after the advent of the printing press, though the use of books for their liturgical use was highly valued as well.[25]

The presses located at various Devotio Moderna houses changed the face of Europe. Besides the spiritual posture of the laypeople pursuing God outside of the Church, there was "the use of the vernacular for religious purposes, the improvement of secondary education, and a commercial approach towards book production. Each of these domains was … meeting ground between the Brethren and the outside world…"[26] This must be taken alongside the knowledge that much of what was printed by the DM presses was for the DM houses themselves. There is certainly evidence of other books being printed, but approximately one-sixth of the 200 incunable found and studied were for the DM adherents themselves.

This was a simple belief of the Brotherhood: that the church was increasingly corrupt, and the common layperson could still serve and follow God, as knowledge of

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[24] Gourdriaan, "The Devotio Moderna and the Printing Press (ca. 1475-1540)," 594.

[25] Gourdriaan, "The Devotio Moderna and the Printing Press (ca. 1475-1540)," 584-591.

[26] Gourdriaan, "The Devotio Moderna and the Printing Press (ca. 1475-1540)," 605.

Him was available to all, not just those with special training. In this way, DM could be seen as a precursor to the Protestant reformation.

Thomas à Kempis was shaped by his experience as a manuscript copyist before the availability of the printing press. Magill Jr. writes that this training "remained one of the most effective ways for students to gain access to the spiritual intoxicating innards of classical and biblical texts."[27] Consider what the author of Deuteronomy writes about Israel's king: "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, *he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law*, approved by the Levitical priests" (Deut. 17:18, emphasis added, see also vv. 19-20). Kempis understood that repetition helps build retention and is a character forming habit that becomes part of a person's essence. Focused journaling with scripture prompts similar to the *rapiaria* ("notebook") will be part of this future DMin project.

Note that, while the exercises and spiritual disciplines vary throughout expressions of Christian faith, including different locales of DM, one commonality is the *use of structure* and *intentionality* of each individual's "program/path," or chosen venue for piety. Van Engen wrote: "It would be wrong to deny that there is indeed a 'program.'"[28] The presuppositional acknowledgement that each Christian is like all others, like some others, and like no other, provides a map for allowing some universality and flexibility in group and individual practice. Today's ethos, still awash in post-modernism, allows for several expressions of devotion that both look to the past and seek to shape the future with present opportunities.

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[27] Magill, Jr., "Turn Away the World: How a Curious Fifteenth-Century Guidebook Shaped the Contours of the Reformation and Taught Readers to Turn Inward," 36.

[28] Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna*, 2.

With the tools and technology available today, people can engage with sensory applications of spiritual growth like never before, including: (1) tactile methods (e.g., copying scripture by hand); (2) auditory methods (e.g., listening to praise and worship music, podcasts, books on spiritual devotion, and meditation or devotional apps); and (3) visual methods (e.g., *visio divina* – similar to *lectio divina* but focusing one's sight on a piece of art as opposed to meditation on a pericope of scripture). The amount of art a person has access to today is unprecedented in the history of humanity. DM practitioners would gaze and meditate upon a piece of "holy art" with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Henri Nouwen describes his own practice of it in *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* which shares the name of Rembrandt's painting.[29] Certainly smells (the Catholic thurible) and movement (King David dancing in 2 Sam. 6:14) could be included in various creative ways to invite God's presence further into one's life. All of a person's senses and life can be brought to God. Likewise, today, there is freedom to build one's own method for time with God.

A person's spiritual walk and devotion with Christ is simultaneously simple and complicated. The simple expression of faith is to turn to God in every moment and situation. The complicated expression is to take a larger view to understand where one is in his or her stages of life. With increased self-awareness, one can use spiritual direction and disciplines to bring themselves to a place that they could never achieve without intentionality. Christians use discipline and practice for growth to become who God says they ought to be. They are powered by the Holy Spirit, not the practitioner. The

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[29] Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1992).

motivation is to please God, not to earn one's salvation or manipulate God. Knowing this is part of the work of self-awareness. The development of self-awareness is a core component of the GSE.

The DM movement and the idea to focus on what one controls resonates in today's world. Paul's urgent text in Romans 12:1-2 is a call to use one's body and mind in a structured and intentional life.[30] Current Western culture generally operates in a mazeway (worldview) that separates one's belief system from one's actions. However, people always live out what they *truly* believe. A person's beliefs and desires drive their lives, *not* necessarily what they ascent to. Even the demons know and tremble (James 2:19). In current Western culture, it is obvious that people are spiritual hungry, seeking meaning for their lives in an increasingly chaotic world.

James 1:22 says, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers, only deceiving yourselves." Further, Dallas Willard was correct in saying, "The will is transformed by experience, not information."[31] DM was a procedure and practice for the layperson to work out their religious impulses in Biblical ways. It guided their *doing.* How can people today transform their beliefs into action and move from simply having an "informational" relationship with God to a personal "transformational" relationship with Him? As Jonathon Edwards said in his sermon *A Divine and Supernatural Light*, "There is a

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[30] "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to *present your bodies* as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Romans 12:1-2, emphasis added. Note Paul wholistically connects the body with the mind, against Descartes *mind-body dualism* which is ubiquitous in today's culture.

[31] Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ's Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 56.

difference between having a rationale judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness [physically consuming honey]."[32] Knowledge alone does not change people, but knowledge that is acted upon transforms. This project is designed to make one's relationship with God deeper through embodied practices.

Van Engen's compilation of traits is particularly pragmatic and applicable today. The virtues listed are all biblical and provide a framework for addressing personal piety based on ruthless and non-judgmental self-examination. Community buy-in (Prov. 11:14; 27:9) with support, admonition, and edification are all part of the system by which transformation and sanctification took place. This project's *Guided self-Examination* (GSE) will incorporate many aspects of devotion that were used by adherents of DM including *resolutio*, *profectus virtutum*, *humilitas*, *obediential*, and *Puritas cordis*. The GSE is designed specifically for the congregants that are part of the project's context.

Many people in today's Western context have elevated the fulfillment of one's personal happiness and are living out of one's emotions as the supreme good. Therefore, for this DMin project, it is crucial to understand how those in the DM movement understood and dealt with their emotions. Unfortunately, the word "emotion" as it is understood today did not exist back then. Instead, various words like "passions…affections…qualities of soul… love… and fear" were used. It is also probable that our definitions of "love" and "fear" are different from theirs.[33] Therefore, careful work must be done to sift through how practitioners brought their emotions before God

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[32] Jonathon Edwards, *A Jonathon Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (United States of America: Yale University Press, 1995), 112.

[33] Mathilde Van Dijk, "The Devotio Moderna, the Emotions and the Search for 'Dutchness,'" *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 129, no. 2 (2014): 24, https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.9540.

and wrestled with them internally. The *Dutchness* of Devotion Moderna has long skewed scholars' perspectives on the supposedly emotionless tone of this movement. Today, a new academic framework is placing this emotional stance more on Dutch nationalistic pride and "Dutch character" than in the DM movement itself.

Van Dijk cites Rosenwein, who understood DM as a community that shared "'a common stake, interest, values and goals' and in which people were trained in particular views and styles of performances of emotions, both internally and externally."[34] This specific cultural understanding of modeling emotions and virtue-signaling is significant today. To appear politically correct (or not) is just one of the many obstacles people must deal with to figure out their own spiritual posture, particularly when it comes to humility and one's relationship with God.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the *Devotio Moderna* movement as a whole and the *Brotherhood and Sisterhood of Common Life* in particular. Gerard Groote was an important figure who was highly influential by his verbal opposition to church corruption while he simultaneously made resources available for those seeking growth and transformation with God both inside and outside of the Church. Thomas à Kempis, Martin Luther, and other reformers were influenced by DM. Anthony Wallace provided a framework for understanding the lifespan of this particular *revitalization movement* in five stages. The use of technology in the printing press was particularly impactful as a tool for the spread of DM and for the edification of its practitioners. Last, the themes of

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[34] Mathilde Van Dijk, "The Devotio Moderna, the Emotions and the Search for 'Dutchness,'" 24.

individualism, freedom of choice, attention management (i.e., what one chooses to meditate on), and various embodied forms of spiritual disciplines (i.e., habit and practices) for wholistic growth were discussed.

The GSE was designed to help participants "rise above their natural feelings and to meticulously guide them into the proper shape and appropriate performance"[35] as the Devout did. The GSE functions by bringing God's presence to bear on situations the participant experienced throughout the day. The Devout made it part of their life goal to seek and see Christ in all situations. How can one wisely keep Christ at the center of one's life and always love God more than *anything* else?

The way to reorder one's "out of order loves" is to set one's attention and focus on what one wishes to love the most. This can re-order one's worship dis-orders. Smaller things in people's lives have obscured their view of eternity. This is why God and the Bible repeatedly encourage and command Christians to meditate on, and remember him and what he has done, and who we are in relationship to him.[36] This addressing of identity in one's image of God and self is of supreme importance. The Devout knew it and designed their practices in such a way as to find God more beautiful and glorious than anything else.

Letting go of something attractive is only easy when one finds something else even more beautiful. The mazeway/worldview of DM is essentially the path that people took to get closer to God. The truth is that everyone is involved in spiritual disciplines at this very moment. However, these practices might not be for glorifying God or directing

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[35] Mathilde Van Dijk, "The Devotio Moderna, the Emotions and the Search for 'Dutchness,'" 25.

[36] Timothy Jennings. *The God-Shaped Brain: How Changing Your View of God Transforms Your Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 226.

one onto a life-giving path. This project worked towards collecting, designing, and modifying best practices for people today to work out their beliefs.

One caution about this project is the absence of like-minded community that was so prevalent in DM. In this project's future development, groups will be encouraged to do the GSE simultaneously and will meet to share their experiences with one another. This will allow for mutual edification with the Holy Spirit.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

This chapter is an exploration of individual sanctification with attention to the work of the Holy Spirit. The goal of this project is to facilitate intimacy in one's relationship with God through abiding relational obedience. To achieve this goal, specific delineations of what the individual's role and God's role are in both relationship and sanctification are needed. These roles are parsed out through Biblical teachings as they relate to the images of God and self by which an individual functions. Claimed beliefs are crucial, yet how a person lives reveals the system of beliefs to which one ultimately adheres (Luke 6:43-45). People always live out what they truly believe in any given moment. For those who follow Christ, moments of sin or relapse are instances of placing one's faith in something other than Jesus; priorities in the "new self" have either been forgotten or disregarded. Ultimately, sanctification takes place when a person becomes reliant upon the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit for abundant life instead of one's own righteousness, thoughts, resources, and volition.

One focus of this DMin project is on what Christians are called to in their relationship with the Holy Spirit and how that might take place. This includes sanctification that relies on the Holy Spirit and placing one's faith in what God has declared about the Christian in Christ. This is not repression of conflicting thoughts about

what God has said but, rather, a framing of those thoughts and emotions into and under what God has proclaimed. God's declarations supersede all individual claims.

Although the English translated word "sanctification" is found in the Bible, this word is part of a larger idea of the holiness of God. God is holy (Isa. 6:3; John 17:11), which positively means he is "set apart." Negatively speaking, he is "not common." Jesus asks God the Father in the High Priestly Prayer to "set apart" those whom he had chosen (John 17:19), "that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:26b).[1] Being set apart means to have Christ reside within the believer.

Although all Christians are called to, "…be holy, for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:16; Lev. 21:8), every Christian is unique in some respects. The way each person identifies and differentiates reveals where he or she is in relationship to God.[2] Individual sanctification that results from abiding in Christ is the call of *all* who follow Jesus, though this may look different for different people.

The context group of participants this project was designed for are Reformed Evangelicals. This specific group resonates with particular doctrine and patterns of thinking. The project reflected these issues alongside the Holy Spirit's prompting and guidance for the most edifying project design.

The body of this chapter will examine a Reformed perspective on sanctification and then move onto how the Holy Spirit is involved with the believer in this process. The conclusion will examine the intersection of the Holy Spirit and sanctification along with

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[1] John 17:26, English Standard Version. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this document are from the ESV.

[2] Each follower of Jesus has unique gifts though all Christians are on the same path. See Rom. 12:6-8 and 1 Cor. 12:12ff.

the rest of the project's Foundation papers. The Biblical Foundations paper focused on the idea of *abiding* found in John 15. This Theological Foundations paper is a deeper investigation into how *abiding* empowers both the active and passive aspects of sanctification. The Historical Foundations paper examined the *Devotio Moderna* movement framed as one's relational stewardship with God during a time of cultural and social upheaval. The fourth and final Foundations paper (Interdisciplinary), will examine Internal Family Systems (IFS) as it relates to Christian identity and how IFS might aid in the stewardship of active sanctification in a Christian's life.

This paper acknowledges that the context for this project is in an economically privileged area. South Dayton Presbyterian Church (SDPC) is a community in the city of Centerville, a suburb of Dayton, Ohio. People living in Centerville are more likely to be highly educated and less likely to live in poverty than a person in the nearby city of Dayton. Due to the socio-economic and educational status of those attending SDPC, an approach to sanctification that begins with an appropriate perspective is crucial.

To speak about, with, or to God carries many implications. This paper is founded on the presupposition that the Holy Bible is God's word toward humanity. This approach stems from my unique life and walk with God up to this point in time. There is a high degree of theology that is influenced by the Reformation but also from my personal experiences and changing images of God. C. S. Lewis famously said that God himself is the great iconoclast. This means that God is constantly destroying and rebuilding every individual's image of God. For the Christian, this means an ongoing sanctification and increasing truth in one's image(s) of God. In short, this paper's unique theology is contextual and didactic and is not here to address every possible issue related to

sanctification but, rather, to specifically explore one's identity and image of self and God in the context of SDPC in Dayton, Ohio.

A second presupposition of this project is that disciples are first and foremost called to obedience. Abiding and placing one's faith in the work of Jesus is the Christian's purview. Results are the work of Christ in the Christian and are God's purview. This was one of the central points of the Biblical Foundations paper. Christians abide in Christ, and fruit is produced by one's abiding relationship with Jesus, not by any personal effort willing it to be so. The view of sanctification put forth in this paper explicates this further.

The good news of the gospel is not that one is enabled to create and rest in his or her own righteousness but, rather, that Christians are able to rest in perfect work of Jesus already provided by God.[3] The Father sanctifies (1 Thess. 5:23), the Son sanctifies (Heb. 2:11), and the Holy Spirit sanctifies (Rom. 15:16). As the Christian makes this knowledge part of his or her lived beliefs, freedom will be found to pursue God's glory from a place of obligation and duty to a place of joyful and worshipful choice.

As the Biblical Theological Foundations paper put forth, *abiding in Christ* (John 15:5) is one of the identity markers of those who are Jesus' disciples. Union with Christ includes "two distinct yet inseparable gifts: justification, in which we are declared righteous before God… and sanctification, the gift of a new life, a new creation, which manifests itself in Spirit-empowered gratitude."[4] Justification is a legal standing imputing

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[3] "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that *in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" (emphasis added) 2 Cor. 5:21.

[4] J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 26.

the righteousness of Christ in the sinner's debt, paying it completely and allowing for God's justice and anger towards sin to be satisfied (Ps. 7:11-12). Sanctification is the new life that results from the freedom from condemnation of sin and the entrance into a life in Christ's righteousness.

Bavinck writes, "… by justification we become the righteousness of God in him [Christ Jesus]; by sanctification he himself comes to dwell in us by his Spirit and renews us after his image."[5] Elsewhere, Bavinck states, "He [Christ] will not abdicate as mediator before he has presented his church – without spot or wrinkle – to the Father. The application of salvation is not less an essential constituent of redemption than the acquisition of it. 'Take away it's application and redemption is not redemption.'"[6] How one understands the doctrines of justification and sanctification will determine how he or she operates in this life. One is either reliant upon God or oneself. This paper will show that it is not the condition of one's faith that is important but, rather, the *object of that faith* that matters. One's faith might be weak, but if it is in Jesus, then Christ dwells in the believer and is working towards his or her sanctification. One's spiritual posture toward God matters more than an individual's effort or results produced.

A Reformed Perspective on Sanctification

[5] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2011), 579.

[6] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume Three: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2006), 525.

The word "sanctification," "holy," and "saint" are used throughout the Bible to communicate something or someone being "set apart" or "the state of being set apart."[7] Christian anthropology states that, since God is holy,[8] human creatures made in his image are also to be holy. However, sin has polluted humanity and has made people unrighteous before God. In the Old Testament, items were consecrated in the worship of YHWH (Exod. 29:36b-37, 40:9-11). Specific people, such as priests, Levites, and first-born sons, were also consecrated and set apart for God, and, ultimately, the nation of Israel is consecrated to YHWH.[9] This idea comes into full view in the New Testament when the promise God made to Abraham to be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3, 22:18) takes place, as those who place their faith in Jesus Christ become consecrated for the glory of God (1 Pet. 2:9; 2 Cor. 7:1), regardless of ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, or gender (Gal. 3:28).

A state of sinlessness cannot be what Biblical authors intend to communicate every instance when using the word "holy." Paul calls the church in Corinth "sanctified," (1 Cor. 1:2) and "saints," (2 Cor. 1:1) yet one of the reasons for writing these letters was to point out the church's sin and urge them to repent and return to the true God (1 Cor. 4:14; 2 Cor. 7:9-10).

Elsewhere, Paul says it bluntly, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). He then appeals to the Galatians'

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[7] Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes: 52 Vital Doctrines of the Scriptures Simplified and Explained* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 203.

[8] Exod. 15:11; Lev. 22:32; Job 6:10; Isa. 6:3, 43:15, 57:15; Ps. 71:22, 77:13; Luke 1:49; Rev. 15:4 and many more.

[9] "Sanctify, Consecrate." In *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary Revised Edition,* ed. Allen C. Myers (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 911.

adoption into God's family. He stresses their freedom in Christ (5:13-15), and commands them to turn to the Spirit for guidance, fruit, and life ("*walk/live* by the Spirit," 5:16a. The Greek *peripateo* is a verb in the present, active, imperative tense – see Gal. 5:16-26). One's relationship with the Spirit is an on-going part of the Christian life, which includes sanctification.

Sanctification is just as much a work of God as justification. Herman Bavinck writes: "A proper understanding of sanctification begins with the conviction that Christ is our holiness in the same sense in which he is our righteousness."[10] Justification and sanctification are distinct yet never apart from one another. This was summed up neatly by John Calvin, who said, "It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is never alone."[11] Elsewhere in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he writes, "…we are justified not without, and yet not by works, since in the participation of Christ, by which we are justified, is contained not less sanctification than justification."[12]

While these are distinct, justification precedes sanctification. Sanctification works out of the state of righteousness that one acquires in and through *Christ's* righteousness. This is not to be confused with the believer's personal righteousness, whose own works cannot satisfy God's holy justice. Rather, this is "righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil. 3:9). Bavinck writes, "In justification, righteousness is granted to us in a *juridical* sense, while in sanctification, it becomes ours in an *ethical* sense. The judicial

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[10] Herman Bavinck, "Justification, Sanctification, and Perseverance," in *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2011), 578.

[11] John Calvin, "Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote," *Monergism*, March 30 2022, https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin_trentantidote.html.

[12] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 523.

act is not fiction even if the owner has not yet taken possession."[13] Justification is being freed from the guilt of sin, while sanctification is being cleansed of its stains.[14] Justification and sanctification necessarily go together, though justification always precedes sanctification.

Zaspel writes, "New Testament writers overwhelming use the 'sanctification/holiness' terminology in terms of what we *are* and *have* in Christ. It is a certain *status* and *relationship* we enjoy in Christ."[15] Understanding this *positional* clarification will help the believer and this project by revealing a deeper understanding of what God says about a Christian's identity as a new creation in Christ.

The entire story of salvation[16] hinges on what Jesus took upon himself on the cross. The one-time cross event is applied to those who turn to God for forgiveness, cleansing, transformation, and sanctification. Jesus's judicial standing before God allows a Christian to have Christ's life and death dwell in the believer, whereby the saint can bear fruit and please God through faithful obedience. 2 Corinthians 4:10 says, "[we are] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." Sanctification is continually returning to Jesus and his power, not one's own power.

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[13] Herman Bavinck, "Justification, Sanctification, and Perseverance," 566.

[14] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume Four: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation* ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2008), 249.

[15] Fred Zaspel, "The Doctrine of Sanctification," *The Gospel Coalition*, February 21, 2022, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-doctrine-of-sanctification/.

[16] The *ordo saultis* ("order of salvation") is defined in various ways, but the point for this paper is that effectual calling, regeneration, and conversion are just as willed and empowered by God as justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification.

This is one place where the Reformed view diverges from other interpretations. Many non-Reformed positions locate a person's sanctification in the individual's faith by claiming that, even though Christians have imperfect righteousness in this life, God will either accept it as "perfect in principle" or because it "carries within itself the warrant of future perfection."[17] The doctrine in question here is whether what matters before God is the *object of one's faith*, versus *the condition, quality, or sincerity of one's faith*. Bavinck persuasively writes, "Faith does not justify by its own essence or act because it itself is righteousness, but by its content, because it is faith in Christ, who is our righteousness; the faith that justifies is precisely the faith that has Christ as its object and content."[18] Without faith in Christ, one ultimately reverts back to faith in oneself and his or her own righteousness for sanctification. God's perfect holy justice is satisfied in Christ's perfect life and obedience, not in the individuals.

The practical theology of this aspect is peace and freedom for the believer and not a spirit of anxiousness about God as judge over and above one's image of God as Father. Again, Bavinck states:

> If faith itself is the ground of justification, God accepts a lesser righteousness than he demands in his law, and gospel nullifies law rather than confirms it (Rom. 3:31). …Here believers are robbed of all consolation; if our weak faith is the ground of our justification, the Christian life is a life of continual fear and uncertainty; we look to ourselves rather than being fixed on Christ.[19]

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[17] Herman Bavinck, "Justification, Sanctification, and Perseverance," 564. This is the debate of *synergism* versus *monergism.* A Reformed stance is *monergistic*, meaning God alone is the source of salvation and the individual brings nothing that might put God into his or her debt or obligation for redemption or salvation. This understanding stems from the *5 Solas* of the Reformation: Sola scriptura ("by scripture alone"), Sola fide ("by faith alone"), Sola gratia ("by grace alone"), Solo Christus ("through Christ alone"), and Soli Deo gloria ("glory to God alone.")

[18] Herman Bavinck, "Justification, Sanctification, and Perseverance," 565.

[19] Herman Bavinck, "Justification, Sanctification, and Perseverance," 565.

God does not allow the believer to stand upon the quality of his or her faith but, rather, to rest in the object of that faith – that is, Jesus Christ himself and his righteousness. Here is true freedom and deep obedience for those who are pursuing sanctification.

Sanctification is returning to Christ's cross as often as necessary to rest in the work of Jesus and be cleansed once again. In 1 John 1:9, the author writes that this cleansing is based on a conditional "if"[20]: "*If* we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (emphasis added). Note the difference between, "he is faithful and *just* to forgive us our sins," and "he is faithful and *merciful* to forgive us our sins."[21] John is not saying that God is not merciful, as he certainly is. John is stressing that in Christ, God's holy and loving justice is completed, and his followers have Jesus' righteousness credited to their account through faith. God's justice will not receive payment from believers whose faith in Christ has already covered their debt. The God of Justice[22] does not collect twice on a single debt.

Christians count on God to be just in dealing with sin so that he remains true to his revealed character throughout the Bible (Deut. 32:4; Isa. 5:16; Ps. 11:7).[23] What avails the believer of the gift of grace is faith – not the faith itself but, rather, *through* the vessel of faith in its object, Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8-9). In this way, if one is not wary, one's faith can become an idol that claims to make one righteous with God. To

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[20] Greek *ean*, meaning "a conditional particle, in case that, if."

[21] Timothy Keller. "Jesus our Defense," *Monergism,* March 30, 2022, https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/jesusourdefense.html.

[22] "It is God who executes judgment" (Ps. 75:7).

[23] Note too, that God's character cannot lie (Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18) and God is unchanging (Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8; James 1:17).

summarize, justification is juridical, sanctification is ethical, and both are based *in* Christ *through* faith. To separate these is to do violence to the Biblical teaching.

Bavinck further clarifies the biblical teaching on sanctification into two categories: passive and active. In the passive aspect, God sanctifies believers (John 17:17, 1 Thess. 5:23). Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:2: "To those *who are sanctified* (Greek *agiazo*) in Christ." (emphasis added). *Agiazo* is used thirty-five times in the NT and is also variously translated as "make sacred," "set apart," "made holy," and "may be honored." Jesus uses this word twice in the "High Priestly Prayer," saying "sanctify them in the truth," (John 17:17) and "that they also may be sanctified in truth" (John 17:19). In these two instances, Jesus references God the Father in doing the work of sanctification to the disciples, not to anything the disciples have done or will do themselves.

Consider Hebrews 10:10, which says, "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." This is a didactic stressing of the passive aspect of sanctification. As such, while different Greek and English words are used in various translations to refer to what many call *sanctification*, this paper highlights that the New Testament theme of sanctification, theologically speaking, refers to *a status one has in Christ Jesus* that is achieved by God. Because this is something God does, it is completely assured and safe to put one's faith in it. This is the passive aspect of sanctification.

However, as Herman Bavinck states, "Sanctification is also a call to active continued repentance... Sanctification is both gift and task… [Christians] are to die to sin and 'present our members as instruments of righteousness' and give ourselves wholly to

God (Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Thess. 4:3; Heb. 12:14; etc.).'"[24] To put it another way, "The Father justifies effectively; the Son meritoriously; the Holy Spirit, applicationally."[25] As such, just as one can see the Father's judicial position satisfied, one can see that the Holy Spirit has a specific role in working out the sanctification found in Christ Jesus for the believer. The unique persons in the trinity all participate in the life of the believer. For the Christian, the passive side of sanctification naturally leads to the active side. This is not to downplay the active aspect but, rather, to empower it from the outworking of what God has provided in Christ as its foundation.

In Ephesians 4:17-24, Paul describes the process of putting "off your old self" (v. 22) and how to "put on the new self" (v. 24). The crucial verse between these two (v.23) is the bridge where it says, "To be renewed in the spirit of your minds." Paul goes on after this identity proclamation to describe the various traits of this new self (v. 25-32) while also warning "do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (v. 30). Behavior flows from identity, whether one lives out of the old self or the new self.

The other pericope relevant to this paper and project when discussing the process of active sanctification is Colossians 3:1-17, which also compares and contrasts the "old self … and … new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (v. 9-10). Again, the practical outworking of the imperatives to "put on the new self" are listed *afterward* (v. 12-17). The key in this pericope is Colossians 3:12, where Paul calls the Colossian believers "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved." This is the identity marker that God has placed on believers. Paul goes on to remind his readers to

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[24] Herman Bavinck, "Justification, Sanctification, and Perseverance," 579.

[25] Herman Bavinck, "Justification, Sanctification, and Perseverance," 563.

"let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" and to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (v.15, 16).[26]

The Christian can work out his or her salvation in sanctification (Phil. 2:12) *because of* the union with Christ in his life, crucifixion, death, and resurrection (Col. 2:12; Rom. 6:1-4). Lewis Sperry Chafer writes: "Our identification with Christ through the baptism of the Spirit is an important basis for all that God does for the believer in time and eternity."[27] One can see that the Bible has a variety of ways to speak about sanctification, but it always starts with God and one's identity found in Jesus. Only from Christ can one live into the new life because it is found in him alone.

Elsewhere, Paul writes how "the Spirit helps us in our weakness… [and] the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:26-27). The Christian's cooperation with the Spirit is a necessary part of progressing in the identity that God has bestowed upon each individual believer. This project makes space to hear the Holy Spirit's voice in prayer and meditation that involves questions about the participants images of God and of self.

Much theological discussion today uses the umbrella term *sanctification*, referring only to the active, when it would be more accurate to say that Christians "are being transformed [Greek *metamorphoo* passive tense] into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18). Paul says that this comes from the Holy Spirit, not from the disciples. The passive tense of the verb shows that this is done *to* the Christian. This teaching refers to a state that the Reformed

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[26] Just as in Romans 8:6b there is mention of peace for the believer. See also 1 Thess. 5:23-24.

[27] Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes: 52 Vital Doctrines of the Scriptures Simplified and Explained* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 111.

tradition would call the "already/not yet" and ought to be referenced by "*renewal*, *transformation*, being *like Christ*, being *godly* and *pure*." [author's emphases][28] Active sanctification is therefore "putting on" the positional status one has in Christ. Even one's active sanctification is empowered by dependence on God, whether one acknowledges it or not. The passive (God's declarative will) is antecedent to anything the believer wills in him or herself.

Sanctification is something that has already begun in the believer but has not happened completely. While writing to the church in Thessalonica, Paul says, "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thess. 5:23-24). Peace and sanctification are often found together in New Testament teachings.

Perhaps the best instance of the relationship between passive and active sanctification is found in Philippians 2:12-13, where Paul writes, "…work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, *for it is God who works in you*, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (emphasis added). The Philippians are called to *work out* their salvation, but it is God *working in them* for his own pleasure. Making space for and cooperation with the Holy Spirit is paramount for sanctification to take place in God's perfect timing.

The Holy Spirit's Involvement with the Believer

[28] Fred Zaspel, *"The Doctrine of Sanctification."*

Having laid out a Reformed perspective on sanctification, the paper now shifts into how the Holy Spirit is involved in the process of consecration and holiness. The Holy Spirit intersects with the will, emotions, and actions in the believer by having all other identity markers subsumed under the new identity one is given in Christ.

The Bible makes clear that the Holy Spirit is a person who dwells in the believer.[29] Therefore, sanctification is part of the relational aspect of one's spiritual life. The Holy Spirit invites the believer into a conversation throughout the rest of her or his life into the things God has prepared for her or him. This DMin project will create space to hear the Spirit's voice through questions and by listening for God's voice amidst the cacophony of voices and upheaval in the world today.

In a relationship, one allows a person to introduce him or herself by what they say about themselves. In the written word of God, the Holy Spirit is described as a distinct person in the Godhead who begot Jesus Christ (Luke 1:35). Various names and titles from the Bible also describe the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of "promise" (Eph. 1:13), "judgment," and "burning" (Isa. 4:4), "Helper" (Greek *parakeltos,* also translated to "Advocate, Comforter, Intercessor" John 14:16), "truth" (John 14:17), "wisdom and understanding… counsel and might… of knowledge and the fear of the LORD" (Isa. 11:2), "life" (Rom. 8:2), "grace" (Heb. 10:29), "glory" (1 Pet. 4:14), and "grace and supplication" (Zech. 12:10), among others.

The Holy Spirit's ontology of being and office (meaning "position of authority") includes a variety of administrations. He regenerates (John 3:5) and "gives life" (John 6:63; see also 2 Cor. 3:6). The Spirit "has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin

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[29] Rom. 8:11, 15; 1 Cor. 3:16.

and death" (Rom. 8:2). As Romans 8:6b states, "To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."

Paul wrote to Christians in Rome, calling them "saints" (Greek *agios* – Romans 1:7). Paul uses this same word in Romans 8:27, saying, "The Spirit intercedes for the *saints* according to the will of God" (emphasis added). Paul is saying that God has already declared that Christ-followers are saints, yet he simultaneously calls us to act like saints. This is justification and sanctification, respectively, but note the Spirit's role of intercession and how Christians are able to choose what they set their minds upon, which leads to life and peace.

Paul's struggle with the law is shown in Romans 7, where he uses the pronoun "I" twenty-seven times, while the Holy Spirit is not mentioned once. However, when transitioning into chapter 8, "I" is only found twice, and "the Holy Spirit appears constantly."[30] For those seeking sanctification through a new identity in Christ, this speaks powerfully to the attention one gives to oneself or to the Holy Spirit's leading. Life in the Spirit cannot coexist with life in the flesh (Rom. 8:13).

In Romans 8:14-17, Paul works out the idea of adoption received by the Spirit who "bears witness with our spirit" (8:16), with a condition "provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (8:17). Again, the idea of actions (i.e., whether to suffer or be glorified) come from the identity one has in Christ already and not the other way around. This shows the working out of sanctification in the believer. The order of cause and effect is crucial. This project seeks to drill this idea deep down into the

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[30] R. A. Torrey, *The Person and Work of The Holy Spirit: As Revealed in the Scriptures And [sic] in Personal Experience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1910), 118.

participants' understanding and heart until it becomes one's everyday perspective – that is, a new spiritual posture that is the natural outworking of being a new creation *in Christ*.

Another aspect of the Holy Spirit regarding sanctification is that of teacher. The Spirit brings to remembrance the words of Christ (John 14:26).[31] The Spirit will guide disciples into all truth (John 16:12-15) and will reveal to believers the deep things of God which are hidden from, and are foolish to, the natural man (1 Cor. 2:9-14). The Spirit then brings understanding that would be impossible otherwise (1 Cor. 2:14-16). The Spirit also "enables the believer to communicate to others in power the truth he has been taught."[32] These attributes help one understand the Spirit's role in the individual's life and sanctification.

Sproul highlights the role of the Holy Spirit (Greek *Paraclete*) as not just comforter and advocate but the one who "works to provide us with strength for the battle as well as consoling us after the battle."[33] Spiritual warfare is an important aspect of sanctification, though that is for a different paper. What needs to be noted here is that the Holy Spirit is the person whom the Christian cooperates with for orthopraxy (i.e., "right practice"). Praise God that he does comfort and advocate for his sons and daughters!

In summary, the Holy Spirit is a person who dwells in the Christian. The Spirit regenerates and works with the believer in sanctification which begins in the believer's justification. If the believer abides in the person of Jesus Christ, then the fruit of that

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[31] Note that the believer is to know the words of Christ so that they might be remembered. In the next verse (John 14:27) Jesus speaks of leaving peace, which is another indicator of God's presence in the believer (cited earlier in this paper by Paul in Romans 8:6b).

[32] R. A. Torrey, *The Person and Work of The Holy Spirit*, 150.

[33] R. C. Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990), 188.

union will come to bear. God himself sanctifies the believer (passive sanctification), which leads and encourages the Christian to do the same (active sanctification). New Testament writers encourage their readers to work toward grasping the gifts that a believer in Christ is entitled to *from* the position of justification and adoption, never *for* justification and adoption. This is the classic teaching of having an indicative followed by an imperative. God always declares before he commands. God always takes the first action toward his children by his grace.

Conclusion

The project developed into a Guided self-Examination (GSE) that focused on raising self-awareness about one's images of God and self. The participant and Holy Spirit worked together in both active and passive sanctification. The GSE is about ruthless *and* non-judgmental self-examination, with the intent of renewing the mind and setting it on the things that are above. The GSE grasps one's new identity in Christ Jesus and works it out in everyday life by re-framing one's images of God and self. Its practice for the duration of the six-week project time made it a habit to sit with the Holy Spirit and examine one's life for that day through the lens of one's identity in Christ.

The project made specific and intentional space for the Holy Spirit to work in the individual's life. Questions were used to uncover aspects of one's identity. This allowed for the removal of any blockages that the individual has developed by not having the righteousness of Christ. The participant was then invited to repent (*metanoia* meaning "a change of mind") about how they lived in the old self and to live into the righteousness provided by Christ Jesus with the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is then invited

to speak to the individual about how to proceed forward in grasping the new life they already possess. Similarly, the GSE will act on several levels of personhood, including emotional, volitional, experiential, and cognitive, all of which consummate in shaping one's spiritual posture towards God, self, and others.

Remembering what God declares about Christians and who they are is a biblical imperative through the Bible. For instance, Jesus left his disciples a physical embodied remembering in the Eucharist. Taking the Eucharist acknowledges one's spiritual poverty without Christ. It also makes visible the invisible relationship with Jesus in consuming the bread and wine for both salvation and sustenance.

Dallas Willard writes, "Spiritual disciplines are activities in our power that we engage in to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort."[34] The GSE is a structured format for an engaged spiritual discipline. One project goal for participants is to rely upon the Holy Spirit for guidance and empowerment. The Holy Spirit's primary goal is to glorify Jesus Christ and draw attention to the riches found in him.[35] Jesus said of the Holy Spirit, "He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:14).[36] Likewise, the GSE seeks to glorify God.

This project will take place through the written word and the Holy Spirit. The Bible is many things, but for this project, it is viewed as communication from God filled

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[34] Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 52.

[35] "His [the Holy Spirit's] work is to represent Christ, to speak of Christ, to exalt Christ, to deal with men with regard to Christ, to convict them of sin because they have not believed on Christ, to cause them to repent because of the place they have not given to Christ. Christ, Christ, Christ is the theme of all His speech and the direction of all his activity." Roy Hession, *Be Filled Now: The Holy Spirit's Role in Helping Christians Attain Spiritual Maturity* (Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 1967), 17.

[36] See also John 15:26-27; Acts 5:32; 1 Cor. 12:3; etc.

with teachings on what God requires of his children. It is a casebook of stories about those who belong to Christ and those who do not. As Matthew Myer Boulton writes, "God provides Holy Scripture and the Holy Spirit, a compact curriculum on one hand and an indwelling instructor on the other."[37]

Thomas Keating wrote, "The spiritual journey is not a career or a success story. It is a series of humiliations of the false self... These make room inside us for the Holy Spirit to come in and heal. What prevents us from being available to God is gradually evacuated."[38] This project is about embracing what God declares and how the Christian can accept their new identity and change in both active and passive sanctification. The old self is replaced with the new by God's grace and steadfast love.

Scazzero similarly states: "[Sanctification] does not mean we don't go back to the past as we press ahead to what God has for us. It actually demands we go back in order to break free from unhealthy and destructive patterns that prevent us from loving ourselves and others as God designed."[39] The GSE will create space for the Holy Spirit to bring healing and growth for individuals as they examine the reasons for his or her beliefs and actions. Moments of transformation will come from the catalyst of GSE questions that are engaged with the Holy Spirit's presence.

In conclusion, the Bible clearly proclaims sanctification as something that happens through the Holy Spirit by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. If one believes that

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[37] Matthew Myer Boulton, *Life in God: John Calvin, Practical Formation, and the Future of Protestant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 100.

[38] Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 38.

[39] Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Unleash a Revolution in Your Life in Christ* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 29.

sanctification is done by him or her alone, violence is done to the believer and the work already provided for the Christian by Christ Jesus. Any righteousness that comes from a source other than Jesus is not sufficient for the consecration and holiness Christians are called into. A clear understanding of this doctrine will allow for peace and freedom in the believer who seeks to follow God. God provides for what he calls Christians into, and he promises to be with the Christian forever. Developing one's relationship with the Holy Spirit is itself a form of sanctification by intentionally setting aside time to spend with God on a regular basis. In the GSE, one is living into the priorities of the new self (empowered and led by the Spirit) and becoming less reliant on the old self.

This chapter on individual sanctification and the Holy Spirit shows that every part of salvation is from God for those he loves and makes holy. God empowers his disciples to wisely follow in his steps. God is Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, and King. May this paper and project make things ready for his imminent return. May those who participate in this future project be encouraged by the words of Philippians 1:6: "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

This chapter is an exploration of Internal Family Systems (IFS) as it relates to identity formation in the Christian. This interdisciplinary field was chosen due to its ability to help reframe and restructure one's identity. To increasingly know one's identity as declared by God is to deepen one's faith and relationship with both oneself and God. Every person's image of God and self are naturally connected, as humanity is made in God's image (*Imago Dei*). When either of these images' changes, the other changes as well. The result of understanding God as Father and oneself as his child is relational safety. This leads to peace, freedom, and security in the individual. IFS has much to offer Christianity, particularly its structured framework for understanding one's inner world, which is a complex ecosystem of various parts, all of which play a role in the individual.

Emotional self-understanding and self-management with the Holy Spirit's presence are major themes in IFS for the Christian. By examining various images of God along with one's "parts," this paper will show that IFS is a powerful tool for reframing one's identity in Christ. While focusing on IFS, this paper synthesizes other ideas that have proven helpful regarding Christian identity formation.

This paper and project use the *integration* model for engaging IFS with the previous Foundations papers. All truth is God's truth, and for the Christian, IFS is about releasing grace into all areas of one's life. As Abraham Kuyper put it, "There is not a

square inch in the whole domain of our human life of which Christ, who is Sovereign of all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"[1] From a theological perspective, IFS invites straying parts back to the Holy Spirit-led-self and asks God for forgiveness when recognizing unbiblical or partially true images of God. The individual then reclaims leadership of one's inner ecosystem with the Holy Spirit. IFS restores order to the new self in Christ.

This DMin project was designed to develop and deepen one's relationship with God and self. There are many themes, but one of the initial impetuses for this project was recognizing a lack of pastoral care at my church context. This project aided congregants in discipleship and in their relational attachment to God. While being trained in counseling, I was taught that my job was to help bring God's presence to bear on the counselee's presenting issue. This project seeks to do so in a structured way but without me present. Instead of processing with me, the participant will be invited to turn to the Holy Spirit. One outcome of this project will be increased intimacy with God, which leads to emotional self-understanding and management. Potential caveats will be addressed in the paper's conclusion.

IFS is being synthesized along with the other foundation topics, with the goals of being Spirit-led, increasing depth in one's understanding and relationship with God and self, and bearing fruit for God's kingdom. This DMin project is a contextualized development of my journey with God, seeking to edify others who struggle with identity, worship disorders, and transformation in Christ. In the future, it will be re-contextualized

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[1] Abraham Kuyper. 1998. *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader.* Edited by James Bratt. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 488.

for other church and para-church settings, but at this stage, it is being designed for my church (e.g., Reformed, Presbyterian).

To place this paper in the context of the DMin project, it would be helpful to summarize the previous Foundations papers. The Biblical Foundations paper examined John 15, particularly scrutinizing the image of the vine and branches and what it means for the believer to abide in Jesus. The ontological nature of the relationship was viewed with focus on the theme of *abiding*.

The Theological Foundations paper built further upon the idea of *abiding* by examining sanctification and how the disciple is both actively and passively involved in his or her working out of Christ's righteousness in the "new self." The new creation[2] in Christ is declared "new" in the sense of his or her *qualitative* nature. There is a *new positional and juridical relationship between the believer and God through Christ Jesus*. The believer is proclaimed holy by God while simultaneously summoned to work out this new identity in the already/not-yet. Christ's righteousness both justifies and sanctifies. The Theological Foundations focused on what it means to bear fruit (sanctification), which comes from one's identity in Christ and his righteousness. This always and only happens *with* Christ, never apart from him.

Last, the Historical Foundations paper examined the *Devotio Moderna* movement and how individuals embodied their beliefs in a time of social and cultural upheaval. The aspects of IFS and *Devotio Moderna* that are relevant to this project were incorporated

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[2] 2 Corinthians 5:17, English Standard Version. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this document are from the ESV. "New creation" from the Greek *kainos ktisis. Kainos* meaning "of a new kind, unprecedented," and *ktisis* meaning "original formation; anything created." Contrast this with the Greek *neos,* also commonly translated into English as "new," but which means "fresh, figuratively, regenerate."

into the DMin project in a structured method for making space to hear God and enter into deeper intimacy with him. The project focused on both *being* and *doing* in the Christian while scrutinizing one's motives and inner ecosystem as both identity markers and gauges for understanding oneself. This Interdisciplinary Foundations chapter will demonstrate how IFS provides a useful method for differentiating and understanding between the old and new self in Christ and bringing *all* of oneself to Jesus. Through a re-framed perspective in one's identity, Christians grow in both knowledge of self and God. This will lead to a deeper identity, wisdom, strengthened relationships (with God, oneself, and others), and greater fruit in the Kingdom of God.

IFS and the Biblical Foundations Paper

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is defined as "A synthesis of two paradigms: the plural mind, or the idea that we all contain many different parts, and systems thinking."[3] For the Christian, "plural mind" means various parts as ordered in the "new self."

"Systems thinking" refers to relationship and attachments (particularly with oneself and God), which are arranged by values, priorities, worship, and idolatry. IFS reframes one's perception of self by welcoming parts that a person judges as sinful, dangerous, or shameful (i.e., exiles). Often, these are aspects of the "old self" that are redeemed and brought into the "new self" through one's *Imago Dei* and the Holy Spirit. IFS then helps realign parts into a healthy functioning inner ecosystem. Acceptance of

[3] Richard C. Schwartz and Martha Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy: Second edition* (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2020), 4.

one's inner world requires both humility and courage and is possible for the believer through one's attachment to Christ.

In IFS therapy, "People are encouraged to identity their parts, to get to know them, to help them unblend, to speak with them, to listen carefully to their stories and when possible, to liberate them from at least some of the pain they carry."[4] In IFS, there are "no bad parts" in a person. Instead, for the Christian, the goal of this approach is to bring a restoration of God's intention by redeeming hurt and outcast parts. IFS is a therapeutic modality, and certain aspects will be brought into the future project.

Richard Schwartz, the creator of IFS writes, "The chattering mind denotes a non-unitary, relational mind. Throughout the day all of us pass from one personality to the next. For most of us this process is mundane, fast, fluid, and largely out of awareness."[5] Relationships exist between the various parts of one's inner worlds. Additionally, each individual part also has a relationship with God. IFS can help the Christian bring *all* parts of oneself to God with compassion and kindness instead of shame and condemnation. David Benner writes, "Self-acceptance always precedes genuine self-surrender and self-transformation."[6]

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[4] Martha Sweezy and Ellen L. Ziskind, *Innovations and Elaborations in Internal Family Systems Therapy.* (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 6.

[5] Schwartz and Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 11.

[6] David Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 11.

The *Self,*[7] also called one's *Imago Dei* (God Image) is the "central core that is who we truly are. The Self is the seat of our authentic spiritual connection to the divine."[8] In secular practice, the Self has been called an "innate presence"[9] and "the divine within."[10] Christians, filled with the Holy Spirit,[11] are able to connect this *Self* with God as the *Spirit-led Self*. This paper will use these terms interchangeably.

One's image of God and himself or herself are always connected.[12] God reveals himself in multiple ways with various names, titles, and actions. While these may appear contradictory, they do not reveal a God who changes. Instead, they show that a person's perception of God is dependent on his or her relationship with him in any given moment. As the person "orbits" around God in varying life circumstances, he or she observes different images. These various names and perspectives lay bare the heart of the person. God does not change,[13] but the person does as he or she is increasingly refined into who God has declared him or her to be. IFS helps remove the dross of one's inner ecosystem.

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[7] *Self*, note the capital "S," is also called the *Spirit-led Self* in Christian practice of IFS and is not to be confused with "old self," or "new self."

[8] Jenna Riemersma, *Altogether You: Experiencing Person and Spiritual Transformation with Internal Family Systems Therapy* (Marietta, GA: Pivotal Press, 2020), 207.

[9] Frank G. Anderson, Martha Sweezy and Richard C. Schwartz, *Internal Family Systems Skills Training Manual: Trauma-Informed Treatment for Anxiety, Depression, PTSD & Substance Abuse* (Eau Claire, WI: PESI Publishing & Media, 2017), 5.

[10] Richard Schwartz, "The Larger Self," IFS Institute, April 23, 2022, https://ifs-institute.com/resources/articles/larger-self.

[11] "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" 1 Cor. 3:16.

[12] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: Volume 1*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 27. This idea is an adaptation of Calvin who laid out his Institutes according to "the knowledge of God" and "the knowledge of ourselves."

[13] Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8; James 1:17.

The Bible has a variety of names for both God and humanity. The focus for this paper and project is the image of a *Father* and his *children*. The first reason for this is that when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he intentionally chose the title *Father*. The second reason is due to intimacy. By working out the implications of one's relationship with God as *Father,* a person begins to feel secure in the relationship, despite his or her sins, flaws, mistakes, and scars.

God, being both holy (boundaried) and loving (agape), never bends in his ontological integrity, though he might appear to from a human perspective. For example, in Proverbs 26:4-5,[14] wisdom is described as the ability to know when to speak and when to be silent. Jesus spoke and Jesus was silent as he followed the Holy Spirit's prompting. Wisdom comes from God[15] and Jesus is wisdom incarnate,[16] but humanity has never been successful at living in wisdom.

Consider the human temperament. Temperament is what an individual develops because he or she lacks wisdom in all circumstances. To be wise is to be flexible when God calls for it and to avoid resorting to one's habitual temperament. God's temperament appears to change to humanity because humanity's *Imago Dei* has been twisted and contaminated by sin. God is always simultaneously holy *and* loving, but humanity does not see God that way. A false and skewed image of God results in one's parts dealing with sin apart from Christ's righteousness.

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[14] "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes." Prov. 26:4-5.

[15] James 1:5.

[16] 1 Cor. 1:18-25, 30; Col. 2:3; Rev. 5:12.

There are three basic reactions to threats: anxiety, aggression, or optimism. Wisdom would say that *depending on the situation,* one of these responses would be appropriate. However, because humans do not know themselves or God the way they could or should, temperaments are developed that the individual uses to navigate life. God's temperament *is* wisdom, meaning he is always both holy and loving while never compromising either characteristic. IFS helps a person become wise by honestly observing in a non-judgmental way *all* the parts that are inside oneself. With IFS, healing begins with the wisdom that mirrors God as both holy *and* loving.

Consider that anger is not a bad thing.[17] Anger reveals a person's heart and what they value, whether God's heart or a human heart. Anger is an expression of love that seeks to protect what it values. However, once a person's anger ceases to be fueled by righteousness from God, it becomes sinful. Humans often project their own motives onto God to justify and rationalize their behavior. Only with the Holy Spirit's help in differentiating parts and examining their intentions will one be able to distinguish between Godly and ungodly anger (or any emotion or action that should be measured according to Christ's righteousness). The part and its anger are not "bad," but what the part does with anger is often dehumanizing and leads to fragmentation. IFS brings parts to the *Spirit-led Self*, which is the person's point of connection with God. This is the cultivation of wisdom in one's spiritual posture, an embodied practical theology of abiding in God moment by moment. IFS helps the Christian *unblend* (sort out) parts and "test everything; [and] hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess. 5:21).

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[17] God is a person who can be angered: "They provoked the LORD to anger with their deeds" Ps. 106:29. And God is angry every day: "God is a just judge; he is angry throughout the day" Ps. 7:11 (NET). God is a *person* and how one perceives God handling his emotions informs that person's *Imago Dei*.

When Jesus recited the great commandment found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, he said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). God did not say to the Israelites or disciples to simply "love God with all that you are." This is because, in recognizing the *various spheres of personhood* in humanity (heart, soul, mind, and strength), God was revealing something about his own personhood. As humanity is made in God's image,[18] so they mirror God and his parts.

Augustine wrestled with this idea in his book *The Trinity* writing "As for the image… of which it was said *Let us make man to our image and likeness* (Gn. 1:26)… it does not say 'to my' or 'to your' image, we believe that man was made to the image of the triad…"[19] Augustine shows that while of one substance, there are various traits that are revealed in one person of the trinity more than others. He cautions to never attribute an aspect of God where it is not justified.[20]

The Biblical God is three persons in one God. Likewise, creatures made in his image have distinctions. Jesus of Nazareth, the God-man, died on the cross. The Holy Spirit and God the Father did not. The Christian God is "too one to be many and too many to be one."[21] This paradox of historic orthodox Christian belief provides a Biblical picture of a God who both knows himself and operates out of these various persons in

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[18] Gen. 1:26-27. One must be careful to distinguish between God's communicable and incommunicable aspects. For instance: Humans do not have the same power as God but are called to use the power they do possess as God does.

[19] Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity: Second Edition*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2015), 392.

[20] Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity*, 271.

[21] Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ's Presence: Final Word on Heaven and the Kingdom of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 171.

specific places, times, and ways. God is wisdom[22] and, thus, integrated (whole) and missional (loving), whereas sinful humans are dis-integrated (fragmented) and self-centered (self-seeking idolators). IFS requires the humility found in Proverbs 11:2 that leads to wisdom.[23]

Categories of Parts

In each person's inner world (ecosystem) under the *Self,* there are three basic categories of *parts*, which are considered "internal entities, or subpersonalities, who function independently and have a full range of feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and sensations."[24] None of these parts were "created" by emotions or experiences but have always existed in the person's inner ecosystem. Dysfunctional parts have adopted extreme roles that are de-humanizing.

First, *Exiles* are injured parts that have been rejected by the Self and have been "shamed, dismissed, abused or neglected… [exiles] are subsequently banished by protectors… to keep them from overwhelming the internal system with emotional pain."[25] The Self considers exiles to be dangerous and therefore suppresses them and keeps them out of one's conscious awareness as much as possible. Nouwen writes:

> A part of you was left behind very early in your life: the part that never felt completely received. It is full of fears. Meanwhile, you grew up with many survival skills. But you want yourself to be one. So you have to bring home the

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[22] "… the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" Col. 2:2-3. "And because of him, you are in Christ Jesus, who become to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" 1 Cor. 1:30.

[23] "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom" Prov. 11:2.

[24] Anderson, Sweezy and Schwartz, *Internal Family Systems Skills Training Manual*, 4.

[25] Anderson, Sweezy and Schwartz, *Internal Family Systems Skills Training Manual*, 4.

> part of you that was left behind. That is not easy, because you have become quite a formidable person, and your fearful part does not know if it can safely dwell with you. Your grown-up self has to become very childlike – hospitable, gentle, and caring – so your anxious self can return and feel safe.[26]

Nouwen's resonance with IFS reveals two key truths. First, the Self has failed at one point and allowed a part to take on a burden that was the Self's responsibility. The Self must apologize to the part, ask forgiveness, and reconcile when the part is ready. The Self must go out in vulnerability to the part before asking the part to be vulnerable in a reciprocal relationship. Second, parts are operating out of fear and anxiety.

Perfect love casts out fear.[27] Faith is a non-negotiable in life, and God asks us to place our faith in him instead of in anything else (idolatry). Faith overcomes fear as the psalmist shows us,[28] and God calls us to place our faith in him.[29] Faith in anything other than Christ will inevitably result in fragmentation and disorder. God asks humanity to switch the object of their faith, from whatever it was in (in this case, faith in how the part was dealing with the burden) to placing it in him alone. God is asking people to place their burdens on him[30] and their faith in him.[31]

IFS maintains that people have been shaped by their experiences and that emotional reasoning rules the individual. Decisions are made by parts instead of by the

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[26] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1996), 49.

[27] "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love." 1 John 4:18.

[28] "I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears." Ps. 34:4.

[29] "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Isa. 41:10. See also Deut. 31:6; Rom. 8:15.

[30] Ps. 68:19, 81:6-7; Matt. 11:30; Ps. 55:22.

[31] John 6:29; 11:25-26; 14:1; Rom. 10:9.

person's *Imago Dei.* IFS aids with the psalmist's imperative to "seek his presence continually" (Ps. 105:4). Exiles are isolated from the internal community, which leads to toxic thoughts and spiraled thinking in the part. The part has lost trust in the Self, which leads to a dysfunctional spiritual posture in the individual. In IFS, the *Spirit-led Self* is the shepherd, and the part is the sheep. The Self, like the good shepherd Jesus, goes out into danger and vulnerability to bring the part back to safety as Jesus did for those who believe in him. Christians model Jesus' behavior in their inner ecosystem.

Jesus came to welcome the exile and to save the lost sheep, saying, "Love your enemies" (Luke 6:27). The Self (and other parts) might consider exiles to be enemies, but they are essential for one's personhood. For a part to be exiled is to do violence to the whole person. For wholeness and healing to take place, exiles must be invited back into their appropriate place in a person's inner ecosystem. Parts become exiles as they hold onto painful events in the past. People who have been sinned against generally treat those who have hurt them as enemies. They seek to protect themselves from further pain and damage. IFS reframes "enemies" as hurting parts that yearn for healing and connection. A part's once adaptive behavior has become maladaptive to the whole. The prophet Isaiah, speaking for God, said, "Come now, let us reason together" (Isa. 1:18). Just as God models his interactions with the church (his body),[32] Christians can similarly reason with their parts. David says in Psalm 23:5, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Exiles are not enemies but essential parts that need compassion and community.

Henri Nouwen wrote:

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[32] 1 Cor. 12:14, 20; Eph. 5:23.

> Think of each wound as you would of a child who has been hurt by a friend… when the child can experience the consoling embrace of a parent, she or he can live through the pain, return to the friend, forgive, and build up a new relationship. Be gentle with yourself, and let your heart be your loving parent as you live your wounds through.[33]

This is the posture of compassionate practice in IFS as one works toward healing by acknowledging and hearing parts that have been wounded and restoring them to community.

The other two categories of parts are both types of protectors, though they function differently. *Managers* are *proactive* protectors. These parts focus on keeping one's inner world in a functioning state. Because of this primary goal, hard-working managers will resort to a "variety of tactics – not least, determined, relentless, criticizing and at times shaming – to keep us task-oriented and impervious to feelings [that are perceived by the Self as "negative"]."[34] For managers, "Any planning capacity becomes centered on protecting oneself from being triggered by the past."[35] Managers, like all parts, have good intentions but tend to be an anxious presence in the Self. Anxiety is a healthy concern that has gone too far. Managers have stopped trusting the Self and taken matters into their own hands.

Unlike managers who are proactive, the last category of parts are *reactive* protectors called *Firefighters*. As the name suggests, these parts are similar to emergency response workers and "tend to be fierce and use extreme measures that managers abhor, like alcohol and drug abuse, binge eating, excessive shopping, promiscuity, cutting,

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[33] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, 110.

[34] Anderson, Sweezy and Schwartz, *Internal Family Systems Skills Training Manual*, 4.

[35] Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 20.

suicide and even homicide."[36] Both managers and firefighters work to keep emotions associated with the exile out of consciousness.

IFS works by first "unblending" parts – that is, differentiating one's parts. This allows exiles, managers, and firefighters to interact directly with one's *Imago Dei*. It does not matter what these parts have done in the past; "Jesus loves every part of who you are – your sanctimonious managers, straying firefighters, and suffering exiles."[37] After unblending, the parts are asked by the Self to speak freely about whatever concerns they might have in the presence of the Holy Spirit. They are befriended and invited to release whatever burdens they might be carrying. Burdens are events and beliefs that come from outside the person and have been brought in and internalized. Cook and Miller write "Jesus doesn't promise to take your problems away, but he does want you to bring your worries to him and find rest for your soul (Matt. 11:28-30)."[38] The part is then integrated back into the Self's inner ecosystem. This includes reconciliation within parts and the Self, as well as new boundaries for all regarding their newly renovated roles. These steps of IFS work out what Jesus said in Luke 11:17: "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls."

To summarize, then, regarding IFS and the Biblical Foundation paper's theme of *abiding*: a person's image of self and God are the lens through which one's identity is formed. Because of this relational attachment between God and Self, it is crucial for the believer to continue *abiding* in Christ for identity formation, strength, and guidance. This

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[36] Anderson, Sweezy and Schwartz, *Internal Family Systems Skills Training Manual*, 4.

[37] Alison Cook and Kimberly Miller, *Boundaries for Your Soul: How to Turn Your Overwhelming Thoughts and Feelings into Your Greatest Allies* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 83.

[38] Cook and Miller, *Boundaries for Your Soul,* 92.

deepens one's faith, allowing for inevitable human mistakes and the opportunity to see God's goodness, faithfulness, patience, and love as *Father*. IFS provides a framework for labeling and understanding the various aspects of one's personhood and then makes room to bring each part individually to Christ. This results in wholeness, healing, and a furtherance of one's identity as God intended as all parts come to abide in Jesus.

IFS and the Theological Foundations Paper

IFS and the theme of sanctification in the Theological Foundations paper also work together. Christian anthropology considers a person's attachment style to God, which shows the living, changing nature of the relationship. For instance, when God renamed Jacob to *Israel* (Genesis 32:28), he was communicating something about their relationship. Israel means "he strives with God" or "wrestles with God." This is what IFS helps the individual do with his or her parts. Parts must be heard, reasoned with, and "wrestled with." When God wrestled with Jacob, he did not use all his power, as Jacob would have been destroyed. A person's Spirit-led Self has a similar power dynamic with its parts. It requires a gentle withholding of power to compassionately love hurting parts. Sanctification means compassion towards the parts that one previously held in contempt (generally exiles). To practice IFS, overactive parts in extreme roles need to be acknowledged but then kindly and firmly[39] asked to step back, so that one's *Imago Dei* can bring all parts to Christ.

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[39] "God is kind, but he's not soft. In kindness, he takes us firmly by the hand and leads us into a radical life-change." Romans 2:4, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language.*

Paul speaks of various parts of the self and war within the self in Romans 7:15-23. To work with these warring parts, IFS uses "8 C's" that are characteristic of the Self: curiosity, calm, clarity, connectedness, confidence, courage, creativity, and compassion. Utilizing these qualities leads to interdependence in the parts and peace in the person. Compassion is the focus here, for a spirit of criticism will not allow for healing and drives the exile farther away. Schwartz observed, "Acknowledging that a small part of me is hurt or enraged is far less shaming or threatening than saying *I am hurt* or *enraged.*"[40] Parts are parts; they are not the whole. Engaging them with compassion is Christlike, and just as Jesus came to serve and not be served,[41] so the Self must serve its parts, leading them on a life-giving path.

Compassion is the most listed emotional state of Jesus found in the gospels.[42] IFS uses these "C's" because they are efficacious. However, Christianity calls for compassion because God is compassionate. To image God is to have a compassionate posture. Christ's ministry brought him into contact with the lost, and his response was kindness and gentleness. Likewise, Christians who have themselves been reconciled to God through Christ were given the ministry of reconciliation,[43] which *includes reconciliation within oneself as well*. This is all possible through the Holy Spirit, who leads Christians

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[40] Schwartz and Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 21.

[41] "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve…" Mark 10:45.

[42] Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34; Mark 9:22, etc.

[43] "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." 2 Cor. 5:18-19.

into their new life.[44] The Holy Spirit (Greek *parakletos* meaning *Comforter*[45]) leads the Christian towards living into an "undivided heart"[46] with compassion.

Thompson says that "whatever our dominant [attachment] patterns tend to be, we will relate with and assume things about God through those same neural networks."[47] Studies shows a high degree of influence comes through human parenting. How much more does one's image of God, whether secure or insecure, lead to a life of flourishing or blockages? This paper is not about attachment theory, but it does stress the point that one's image of familial authority (particularly as Jesus tells his disciples to pray to God calling him *Father*) has tremendous power and inevitably shapes a person's life. Much of IFS has to do with healing. Schwartz writes, "it's the capacity to repair the inevitable ruptures with those we love that constitutes successful intimacy and relationship."[48] Christians are to love themselves as God loves them (agape).

Internalized Life Commands

IFS helps delineate and process parts that are carrying *internalized life commands*. A life command is a belief the individual sees, hears, or infers about oneself. These life

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[44] "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control." 2 Tim. 1:7

[45] John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1. *Parakletos* can also be translated *Intercessor*, or *Consoler*.

[46] "Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name. I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, *with my whole heart.*" Ps. 86:11-12, emphasis added.

[47] Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections Between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices that can Transform Your Life and Relationships* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2010), 118.

[48] Richard Schwartz, "The Larger Self," IFS Institute, April 23, 2022, https://ifs-institute.com/resources/articles/larger-self.

commands generally happen early in life but can take place later as well.[49] When a belief is brought into the heart and adopted by a part, it becomes *internalized.* Whether the belief is true or not is irrelevant, as the person still lives as though the belief *was true.* Ernest Becker described the protective movements of the individual in a world pervaded by fear as "character armor," saying, "The situation of the child was an impossible one and that he had to fashion his own defenses against the world, had to find a way of surviving in it."[50] This is a helpful parallel image for understanding how parts in IFS work to protect the Self. Parts in extreme roles are "developed types of protective armor" that seek to guard the Self.

Two Biblical passages connect to IFS by highlighting sanctification. Consider the man whose son was inhabited by an "unclean spirit." The father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). Part of him believed Jesus could help his son. Part of him either didn't believe or was unsure of what Jesus could or would do. Both parts were genuinely inside him. Ambivalence is not a sin, and doubt is not disbelief. Living faith has space for doubts, whereas a nominal faith is unable to question its perception of obedience. This is because living faith understands that it is *the object of one's faith that matters, not the sincerity or amount of faith*. This specifically relates to the issues of sanctification in the Theological Foundations paper. The issue here is a fundamental misunderstanding about what faith is, its content, and its object. The desire to live faithfully is commendable, but when the quality of one's faith is of greater value

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[49] John Savage, *Listening & Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Group Leaders* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 122-139.

[50] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York, NY: Free Press Paperbacks, 1973), 61.

than the *object* of that faith, the danger of slipping into works-righteousness is present. The ambivalent father shows that one can turn to Jesus, *even with doubts*. The Self accepts and redirects the part to turn to Jesus instead of bearing burdens that Christ will take, thus working out sanctification in Jesus's power and not one's own.

Another poignant place that shows IFS in action is found in the parable of the prodigal son. In this didactic story, Jesus says that the son who was engaged in "reckless living (v.13)" eventually "came to himself" (v.17) (Luke 15:11-32). In the lens of IFS, "coming to oneself" means to humbly acknowledge reality. Note that pain is involved in this turning toward oneself, as expressed by the passages, "He began to be in need" (v.14) and "He was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate" (v.16). Sometimes pain is God turning a person's face toward reality.[51]

It is after the son "came to himself" and returns to the Father that the son discovers he does not define himself. Even as he traveled home, the son desired to control his life and be treated as a servant, but it is the Father who names and treats the son according to his will, power, and is the reality that follows. The Father's will is done, not the sons. The "acquired self" of the son is not the same as the "given self/identity" bestowed upon him by the Father. The son had been identifying with his perception of himself as the final word about who he is. Through the lens of IFS, when he "came to himself," the son reached a new depth of understanding, even though his image of self was still partially inaccurate. The Father's speaking over and treatment of the son lets the son hear and see who he *actually is*.

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[51] Ps. 119:67, 71.

Searching for oneself apart from God is to deny God as creator and sustainer. This is also a refusal to accept who God declares the person to be and a denial of God's authority as Sovereign. Seeking for one's "true authentic self" apart from God is both foolish and sinful. People inevitably gather their identity from somewhere: from their parent's treatment of them, from peers, from culture, or from internalized life commands. Culture's current highest possible good is the curation of oneself. This is a dangerous position without God and his wisdom.

To understand oneself, one must accept what God declares about the person. This means God's word holds primacy over one's own thoughts and opinions. It means that reading scripture and spending time listening to God's voice (i.e., cultivating intimacy) are non-negotiable for Christian identity formation. It also means that the image of God as "Father" must be prioritized into one's relationship with God. A person is not just declared legally clear from sin due to Jesus' righteousness. One is then also made a son or daughter of the King.

Packer writes, "Adoption… is *the highest privilege that the gospel offers:* higher even than justification."[52] To explain, he writes, "This is not to say that justification is the *highest* blessing of the gospel. Adoption is higher, because of the richer relationship with God that it involves."[53] A judge can forgive the criminal in court, but what if the judge adopts you as his child and brings you into his family? As Packer explains, "Justification is a *forensic* idea… Adoption is a *family idea*."[54] This goes even further than Jesus calling

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[52] J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 186. [original emphasis]

[53] Packer, *Knowing God*, 187.

[54] Packer, *Knowing God*, 187.

the disciples his friends (John 15:15) or of Moses (Exod. 33:11) or Abraham (James 2:23) being called "friends of God." Adoption into the family of God is the fulfillment of the covenant of God's agape love. Practicing IFS from a place of adoption in God's family releases the individual from any unwarranted fear or anxiety. 1 John 5:18 says, "…he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him." With God as one's Father, security is guaranteed. This protection results in courage for the individual in handling one's wandering parts.

For the Christian, IFS and sanctification are also about repentance. The Self had straying parts that were operating under a false image of God. Here, the believer can participate in sanctification by repenting the fallacious image. Consider two passages where Jesus speaks about this important aspect of relationship to him. In Luke 5:32, Jesus says "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to *repentance*." In Matthew 3:8, Jesus says, "Bear fruit in keeping with *repentance* [Greek *metanoia*]." Metanoia means "to think differently; to reconsider; to change one's mind; to repent." These two verses about repentance show that one's thinking (i.e., one's image of God) *and* one's actions (i.e., repentance) are connected. A person can "repent" of an incorrect, unbiblical image of God.

If any part is acting in a way that de-humanizes the person, the Self gently leads that part to *metanoia*. The part is not repenting for what those feelings were or for even having them but is, rather, *changing their mind about the validity of those beliefs*. The part was believing something false about God and his character. The part was wrong in believing that God was uncompassionate, unavailable, and expected them to deal with this situation alone. Various parts and the Self will all have to repent their image of God

at one point or another during this lifetime. The Self must repent the false God image (which the self naturally mirrors) and return to the true living God. C. S. Lewis said, "My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast."[55] God does not change, though his identity appears dynamic. He accommodates the objects of his love while never compromising his holy ontology. As one's faith deepens in the image of God as the perfect Father, individuals will be able to continually bring their straying parts to Christ for ongoing growth, intimacy, and sanctification.

Peterson writes, "if we want to change our way of life, acquiring the right image is far more important than diligently exercising willpower."[56] The person made in God's image has a dynamic identity *because* he or she is made in the image of God. Learning the limitations of reality is just the beginning of wisdom. After that, one must operate accordingly.

To summarize the intersection of IFS and sanctification, as one's Spirit-led Self invites exiles back into one's inner ecosystem, sanctification can take place as truth increasingly replaces falsity. Will the individual remain Jacob or take up the name Israel? Compassionate holiness is God's method of dealing with humanity. Likewise, the individual should operate in this model within oneself. The object of one's faith is the basis for security and hope, not the quality or sincerity of that faith. As believers are adopted into God's family, further relational depth will result in repentance as dross is removed from one's image of God. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "And we all,

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[55] C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1961), 76-77.

[56] Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 6.

with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." The Guided self-Examination (GSE) will create space to meditate upon one's image of God and self and thus be transformed.

IFS and the *Devotio Moderna*

Last, IFS and *Devotio Moderna* (DM) can be considered together. Of DM as a movement, Scholar John Van Engen said that its core thrust was about "reformation of the soul and the rejuvenation of the spirit as the basis for renewal of the communal life, whether within or outside monastic walls."[57] This project will resonate with practitioners of DM who stressed inward reform and the cultivation of holiness and integrity through lived piety. For this project, IFS will become a part of the GSE in the form of a spiritual discipline, something that DM emphasized.

Though a renewal of communal Christian life is an admirable goal, the Holy Spirit is ultimately the dispenser of such gifts in his perfect timing. For now, people may enter into practices similar to DM for the purpose of growing in intimacy with God. Like Peter, we cast the net, but God provides the fish. DM and Christian practice of IFS intersect in their desire to live in obedience to God's word. The New Devout worked hard at embodying their identity as they understood it. IFS does this for people today in the current psychologized culture through the sanctifying of one's inner parts and ecosystem.

Another area of intersection is the idea that the individual has just as much access to God as the priest or pastor in the local church. Many DM endeavors were taken up

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[57] John Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 2.

individually for the purpose of communion with God. Special training was not necessary, and while IFS can be done with a therapist, its unique vocabulary and perspective will act as a catalyst for spiritual renovation, especially when the Holy Spirit is invited into conversation with the individual's inner world.

Paul Tillich wrote, "He who is able to love himself is able to love others also; he who has learned to overcome self-contempt has overcome his contempt for others."[58] Only by embracing the understanding that God has accepted a person is that individual then able to accept themselves.[59] This will affect one's ontological presence with other people. In the foreword to Riemersma's book, Richard Schwartz writes:

> The way in which you relate to your own parts will parallel how you relate to people who resemble those parts. If you hate or fear an angry part of yourself, for example, you will struggle to have compassion and forgiveness for an angry person in your life.[60]

Thus, DM and IFS, in anticipation of communal Christian renewal, prepare the individual by developing interiority through humility and reliance on God. As individual's lives are healed and transformed, the world is also transformed.

Conclusion

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[58] Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 158.

[59] "For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything." 1 John 3:20.

[60] Richard Schwartz foreword to *Altogether You: Experiencing Personal and Spiritual Transformation with Internal Family Systems Therapy*, by Jenna Riemersma (Marietta, GA: Pivotal Press, 2020), xii.

IFS helps people regain an undivided heart towards God under the guidance of one's *Spirit-led Self.* This takes place through the healing of fragmentation that has occurred in one's inner world. IFS helps people sort through their parts, which have their own voices and desires, and brings them into relationship with Jesus. With identity formation from God the Father, Christians are given new natures and both the ability and power to live into who God declares them to be. IFS aids the believer in restructuring one's inner ecosystem by removing dehumanizing posture and behavior, so that the *Spirit-led Self* is in control.

Many people view their identity as being fundamentally broken, but Biblical anthropology says that humans were originally created "very good."[61] After sinning, humanity lived in separation from God both spiritually and physically in the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. IFS offers a way to spiritually facilitate the reconnection of the scattered parts of oneself.

Today's world is one of self-creation, self-curation, hyper-authenticity, and expressive individualism. The Christian finds his or her identity in Christ and says that turning to Him as Savior, Lord, and Sustainer is *more,* not less, authentic to one's personhood. A Christian understanding of IFS says that the *Self*, the *Imago Dei*, is imprinted with God's very being. One's Imago Dei is discontent except in Christ alone.

The wisdom of IFS is not new, though the definitions, vocabulary, and systemization are, and these have been proven to edify.[62] When writing about befriending

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[61] Gen. 1:31.

[62] "IFS is rated effective for improving general functioning and well-being on the National Registry for Evidence-Based Programs and Practice (NREFF) by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA); and is considered promised for improving phobia, panic, generalized anxiety

one's emotions, Nouwen said, "The way to 'victory' is not in trying to overcome your dispiriting emotions directly but in building a deeper sense of safety and at-homeness and a more incarnate knowledge that you are deeply loved."[63] This sums up the experience of IFS without it's specific language. Accept God's love and be changed. Then offer that love to all parts of who you are.

As Andy Crouch puts it, "Flourishing requires us to embrace both authority and vulnerability, both capacity and frailty."[64] IFS helps the *Spirit-led Self* and its parts heal and enter into new roles and relationships. The Self must exercise its authority, and the parts must be vulnerable and trust the Self to treat them well. For a person to "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Col. 3:15), one must place their parts in the appropriate role *after placing themselves* in the appropriate role under Jesus' care. This requires humility and the courage to follow wherever God might be leading. This resonates with Jesus' calling for Christians to model their interactions with others based on how he loved.[65] In IFS, "others" are defined as parts of ourselves. We are to love these parts as Jesus loved us. When the world sees transformed lives and people changed, the world will know that God has been at work.

One word of caution is that while principles of IFS can be adapted for individual use there is no substitute for healthy community, which is necessary for growth,

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disorder and symptoms, physical health conditions, and depressive symptoms." Schwartz and Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 5.

[63] Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, 42-43.

[64] Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk & True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 11.

[65] "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." John 13:34-35.

accountability, and joy. God himself is communal in the form of three persons in one being. Likewise, Christians must prioritize mutual self-giving community with other believers.

Thomas Merton wrote, "Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him."[66] My prayer is that the work that has been done for these papers would glorify God and edify others in their own inner world, as we learn to care for ourselves and our neighbor as ourselves.

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[66] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York, NY: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1961), 36.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

At the conclusion of the Ministry Focus chapter, this project proposed that doing the Guided self-Examination during Lent of 2023 would give participants a resource for living their life "in Christ," while increasing their experience of peace. One presupposition was that every individual's relationship with God was the supreme identity marker of his or her life. From this one relationship, all of life flows and is directed. This project was designed to help raise the participant's awareness of his or her images of God and what sort of spiritual posture they led the person towards. What kind of person would they become by believing and following this image of God? How was this reflected in their own lives as the beliefs through actions, habits, and patterns? I desired to craft a tool that would help the people who attended my home church at the time, South Dayton Presbyterian Church (SDPC). There was a need for various discipleship ministries and tools, and I understood that my old images of God had crafted a particular sort of life in me. Not one that had been glorifying to God, but one that limped along mostly on my own power. I knew that inner change happened by the power of God, in the Holy Spirit, and I wanted to help those who volunteered their time to participate by creating space for developing their relationship with God as the daughter or son he intended. Pride and misused free will frequently hold people captive in a crippled

spiritual posture. I wanted to bless SDPC and understood my own sense of peace had come from God as a gift of grace.

God was still writing my life story in this season. During the three years in this DMin program, I met the woman who would be my wife and married her while moving to Columbus, Ohio. During the implementation section of this chapter, the implications of this move for the project will be made clear.

SDPC is part of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) denomination and is Reformed and Evangelical in their doctrine. Reformed traditions such as catechesis using the Westminster confession of Faith are used in raising children. SDPC is primarily comprised of medical, Air Force, and civilian personnel who work at the nearby military base. The average church member knows the Bible well and has a general understanding of theology such as Penal Substitutionary Atonement (which is one of their primary images of God, i.e., judicial). People can learn and are transformed by trying out different practices. At SDPC, I created the GSE as a spiritual discipline focusing on what might follow after biblical expertise, attempting to prioritize peace resulting from one's identity as God's beloved child.

Seminary taught me to two incredible ideas. First, one professor introduced the idea of actively destroying and re-creating one's image of God. This sounded heretical until he explained that this was merely one's subjective *image* of the one true God, which appears in hundreds of different ways throughout scripture. The idea being that as we destroy our current image of God and rebuild it, the re-conditioned image is closer to the actual God that exists than the previous one. The new second image is more nuanced and allows for personal life experience to be part of the image.

This is a type of application of the idea of the "hermeneutical spiral" which centers on Holy Scripture. Through wrestling with the text, one gains new perspective and understanding via personal engagement resulting in a unique image of God. Hermeneutics refers to interpretation, and through the GSEs, Jesus himself speaks through the Holy Spirit telling us who he is and what he is like. This takes place in one's mind and heart with the presence of the Holy Spirit by communing, conversing, wrestling, accepting, reflecting, and glorifying God. Who better to tell a person about God than God himself? The "hermeneutical spiral" is a recognition of the development of one's faith, and one's images of God and self over time. By abiding in Christ, these images move closer to the reality of what God declares, hence they spiral more and more tightly towards Truth with the passage of time. A sustained connection with Christ means deeper and more intimate relationship as time passes.

The Guided self-Examinations (GSEs) were designed to re-frame the participant's image of God as "Christ-in-you" (Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27). This constant reminding and reframing of both what the Bible says about God, along with the participant's subjective image of God, created a large inventory of images. Christ, the living hermeneutic (i.e., the embodied human interpretation of God; see Col. 1:15, Heb. 1:3) who never leaves or forsakes us, is always with us and communicating to us who he is. Having an image of God is non-negotiable and every human being has one, even if he or she is unaware of what it might look like and the consequences of such an image. There are often multiple images of God happening simultaneously in our minds and hearts.

The second thing that impacted me deeply at seminary was the idea that my job as a provider of pastoral care was to bring God's presence to bear on the parishioner's

presenting problem. This meant that I would have to physically be present. I wanted to create a tool that would help facilitate that happening without my physical presence. The project ended up being my first attempt at bringing these two passions together: the participants non-negotiable image of God and how that presence effected his or her life. This initial iteration of these ideas proved fruitful in some ways and brought out other ideas worth exploring in the future which will be discussed in the conclusion section below.

The hypothesis involved deep levels of identity formation because many people were not aware of the images that controlled them. Without awareness, there can be no plan for change or transformation (active sanctification). With awareness, one can receive and be changed by God himself (passive sanctification). There can be mental ascent and correct theological responses, but people often do not understand why they do the things they do (Rom. 7:15).

One's images of God and self are the non-negotiable constraints that shape how one develops and acts out of his or her spiritual posture – one's "being-in-the-world." The GSEs sought to raise the awareness of the participant's images of God and self while also bringing a particular image of God into the participant's day. It is one thing to know God is your Father or Judge and another to *experience* that knowledge in your embodied life. Many people at SDPC have extensive biblical knowledge and training, but few (so I thought) had awareness of the relational aspects of God's story embedded in their lives. By this I mean that their transformation into new creations in Christ was shaped by ways that their denomination practiced. All churches stress certain images of God and these inevitably shape the congregants spiritually, emotionally, and cognitively.

For instance, in one group interview, a participant reported that inviting the Holy Spirit into his devotional GSE time was both new and impactful. He had always focused on God the Father and on Jesus Christ in his prayers. This simple re-framing expanded his image of God and gave him reason to pause and consider that he may have been ignoring some of the ways in which God presents himself to his body, the church.

If one's identity is the foundation of what a person lives out of, and one's images of God and self are the substance of that foundation, then this paper is important to everyone who cares about his or her own life. It doesn't matter to me personally if the Chicago Cubs won the World Series in 1907 (a fact). But I have everything in the world at stake when I understand that my images of God and self (and their connection through my *Imago Dei*), are both objectively set by God and dynamic in my subjective understanding and use of them. The inventory for images of God and self is likely endless. Consider what one participant reported in the group interviews saying,

> "He [God] is the ultimate contradiction… He is everything, and yet he is very simple… He is the ultimate farmer, he is the ultimate scientist, he is the ultimate artist, he is the ultimate parent, you know? He is everything, and yet he can be… it's very simple. [And] complex."

These images are truth claims and determine whether I run from God or come to him as his beloved child. This is supremely *practical* theology that determines who a person is and how they live their life, one of the core foundations of every human being.

The Integration paper explained how the *Guided self-Examination* (GSE) came about as a spiritual discipline in the form of a Lenten devotional. The form of the spiritual discipline is secondary to the goal that it works toward, namely, increased intimacy with God due to new and expanded images of God and self. The hypothesis states that this intimacy will result in the participants experience of peace in their relationship with God.

One of the reasons I was attracted to the DMin project at United was because I wanted to produce something that would glorify God and edify those who used it. These DMin projects are designed to be replicable in other church and para-church contexts. Part of contextualizing a project is designing it to be easily understood and used by the volunteer participants. I believed I had already done this in the case of SDPC as it was the ministry context portion of my Synergy paper alongside my Spiritual Autobiography. However, when I met with the Senior Pastor and Executive Director at the beginning of the fourth semester, the pastor expressed some concerns with the language of the project.

Specifically, I had originally named the devotions as *Identity-based Examens* (IBEs) to acknowledge a modified form of the Examen that came from Ignatius of Loyola and the Society of Jesuits. I thought that simple non-Reformed practices that aligned with Reformed theology would be a good bridge for these congregants. The conversations I had with church members over the previous two years led me to believe that they were open to other edifying theological expressions. The pastor asked me for some sample devotions to have the teaching Elders look over so that they could be reassured that I was not teaching anything unbiblical or heterodox.

Everything was accepted with a request that I "make the language more Reformed," before passing out the devotions. I re-edited the IBEs and changed the name of the devotions (at the suggestion of the Elders) to *Guided-self Examinations* (GSEs). This was a humbling moment for me. I had thought I had something valuable for the participants to engage with, and the results show that I did by the grace of God. But it was a good reminder for me to practice the self-awareness and accommodation that I stressed so vigorously in the devotionals themselves. It was as if God was asking me to

make sure I was practicing what I was preaching. I'm grateful for SDPC and the Senior Pastor and Executive Director. We all desire to serve the parishioners and see God glorified and I'm blessed to have tried to make my project as accessible as possible for this context. In regard to the accommodation and replicable aspects of the project in other contexts, the content would be dependent on the setting. For example, if in the future the GSE is used in a more "charismatic" context, I would over-emphasize what I believed had been under-stressed in their teaching and images of God and of self. I was intentionally pushing a more meditative practice and stressing both active (by doing the GSEs) and passive (in the content of the GSEs) sanctification in the devotions for SDPC.

The other change in the GSEs for SDPC was an acknowledgement that the term "Self" (capitalized) that is frequently used in Internal Family Systems to refer to the soul or "innate presence" of the individual be changed to "self." For the Christian, this "Self" is called the "Holy Spirit-led Self," and reflects the reality of one's Imago Dei and the indwelling presence of Christ. The capitalization of the word "self" made SDPC's pastor unsure if participants might wrongly think of this as a type of deification. To avoid any confusion, all devotional material changed "Self" to "self."

The methodology section of the project beginning here explores the approach and reasoning for why the project was designed the way it was. I had already led the *Abide: Gospel Transformation and Recovery* group at SDPC. This centered around what it meant to be "in Christ" and struggle with addiction. The class met every other week for a year and helped change participants lives as I heard stories shared about the materials we went through coming into their everyday lives. These stories revealed that they lived differently due to participating in the Abide group. They were taking in the material we

studied, saying it back to me sometimes, and it was affecting their lives in positive ways. I was delighted that God would use me to serve in such a manner. Because of the Abide group, I already understood that I could teach a class, lead a workshop, and facilitate a discussion. One of the goals of the GSE was that participants would be able to understand themselves better without my physical presence. I desired to create a tool to help those I might not ever meet in this life.

The devotional format seemed like a natural follow up to what had been happening in the Abide group. I was using questions from God and in the Bible (such as "Where have you come from and where are you going?" (Genesis 16:8); "Who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15); "Do you do well to be angry?" (Jonah 4:4); etc.…) in both their original context and de-contextualized for the group members. These were texted out between meetings to remind the Abide member to ask themselves where God was with them in their current situation. The simple tool of texting questions and prayers out reminded people of God's presence, which had a large impact on some in the group. When a person sees him or herself in alignment with people and characters in the Bible, it is called "twinning" (e.g., "I'm just like Jonah"). This refers to seeing oneself in the larger story of God's narrative in one's life as it mirrors a story in the Bible. The outcome of twinning is resonance with the community of God and an increase in empathy for characters in the Bible.

The GSE was an attempt at developing reminders of God's presence for the participant. The daily repetition of regularly inviting the Holy Spirit to speak and listening for his voice would shape the participant's relationship with God. The GSE was a spiritual discipline that was created to meet the need for strengthening identity

formation in the parishioners. This was informed by the Historical Foundation chapters examination of Devotio Moderna, as it related to personal piety and focusing on an area of life that the participant can control in a world that appears chaotic, in upheaval, and out of control. The devotional was flexible to a certain degree, allowing for a variety of time for practice (though it was suggested it take place at the end of each day). It incorporated the ideas of destroying and recreating one's images of God and self simultaneously by introducing various titles, names, and actions of God along with questions which probed into how this aspect of God was reflected in one's Imago Dei. Themes of repentance, active and passive sanctification (Theological Foundation), re-framing, and Internal Family Systems techniques (Interdisciplinary Foundation) were woven into the GSE. This content was built upon the dual aspects of God's holiness and his love, of Jesus as the Vine and his followers as the branches (Biblical Foundation). This took place with an invitation to the Holy Spirit to sit with the participant in an intentional way for the purpose of communing and communicating with God.

Each GSE was limited to one page and eleven-point font. The total time for each day's devotional was designed to not exceed fifteen minutes, including the Focused Journaling Assignments. Each day would begin with an invitation to prepare for an encounter with God. Each participant was also given a one page "Quick Guide" they could use as a bookmark. It briefly explained each section of the devotional. The "Preparation for Encounter with God" section reminded volunteers to slow their body down with deep breathing which stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, causing one to relax. There were clear reminders that one's spiritual posture was the focus. Honest answers were more important than correct theological responses. Each day had a

scripture reading which the participant was invited to read slowly out loud twice and then invite the Holy Spirit to speak to them about the verse(s).

Next was the section entitled “Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ.” This was the body of the teaching and didactics involving the themes and topics related to images of God, oneself, and identity formation. There were questions for each day at the end of this section that probed into the participants understanding of the scripture along with anything he or she might have heard from the Holy Spirit.

Then there was a short prayer where it was suggested to have one’s body match the posture of the prayer. This looked like “kneeling for humility, opening your hands for transparent receptivity, and raised hands for giving glory to God.” Only two participants reported doing this. One said it helped him focused and the second said he was inconsistent in doing it every day (this participant only ended up completing 33 of the 46 devotional days).

Next was related scripture to complete each day. This section was labeled as “God’s Reassurance,” and this section tended to focus on passive sanctification and God’s work in the participant’s life. Love and faithfulness were stressed and often the opening daily scripture would be connected to this reassurance.

The last item on every day’s GSE was the phrase: “Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today.” This was to help the participant digest and reflect on that day’s devotion. It was also getting the volunteer in the habit of self-awareness and preparing them for the weekly Focused Journaling assignment at the end of each weekly themed section. There are sample GSEs available for review in Appendix A.

The project implementation was not as simple as I had initially hoped. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I met my wife in semester one of this DMin program and was married in the middle of the fourth semester. I then moved from Dayton, Ohio to Columbus, Ohio and continued the project from our new home. I was blessed that leadership at SDPC and UTS allowed me to continue and finish my project from a distance. The project took place during Lent of 2023, starting Ash Wednesday, February 22nd, and ending on Holy Saturday, April 8th, forty-six days later. This made the devotional six weeks and four days long. Each week was roughly divided into themes that arose during the two years of research alongside the ideas that I believed critical for identity formation. These were separated into the following weekly partitions: (1) Introduction to the GSE and its various themes and ideas; (2) non-negotiables; (3) Internal Family Systems; (4) the Old Self and New self; (5) identity markers; and (6) wisdom and peace.

Long before I left SDPC and moved to Columbus, the Senior Pastor and Executive Director agreed that I could do my project there. Indeed, my project was shaped with the congregants of SDPC in mind. As we had no way of knowing I would get married and move, I'm grateful for their continued support of my education and the expansion of God's kingdom in this way.

Four weeks before Lent, I drove back to Dayton to attend church and made an announcement at both services to see if there would be enough participants to meet my goal of 8-10 (as seen in the project proposal). This was a good first step for the project. To be manageable, it had to be as focused and as small as possible while still providing enough data to study. I ended up with a total of 17 participants who agreed (at least

verbally) to participate. I was advised by my professional associates (and others), to make sure I had more volunteers than needed as many would drop out for a variety of reasons. This proved to be the case. I knew that to gather as much data as possible, it would be wiser to err on the side of "unforeseen circumstances" that would *not* be in my favor.

The weekend before Ash Wednesday, I drove back to Dayton with a copy of the GSE along with binders and a case of paper. I made copies at the church and assembled the devotionals and then emailed the participants and met with them at church on Sunday, February 19th. After the volunteer participant reviewed and signed the waiver form, I explained the format and gave each participant a copy of the devotional along with a Pre-Survey, instructing them to fill out the Survey *before* beginning the GSEs on the following (Ash) Wednesday.

I made it explicitly clear to the participants that I would be checking my UTS email every day during Lent to troubleshoot any potential problems. I also made my personal cell and text available to them. For the entire season of Lent I received only two emails, one of which was a person informing me they could not participate due to over-commitments, and another with minor clarifying questions (both in the first week). In addition, there was one other phone call and text thread that answered minor questions. The devotional included a page of local resources to comply with any foreseeable crises that might arise from past trauma. These included local and national Mental and Behavioral Health websites and phone numbers along with local counseling resources that SDPC recommends and uses. To my knowledge, no one used any of these.

I collected data in three forms which will be further discussed in the next "Summary of Learnings" section. First, there was an identical "Pre/Post-Survey" drawing

out information relating to the upbringing, and present image of God and self, in the participant. One problem in using any data collection tool, is the degree to which the participant filled out the material. Though I had asked them to be filled out completely, in both the Pre- and Post-Survey, some portions of the six questions were not completely filled out or had minimal answers with no clear explanation. I used as much of the data as possible in all three data collection methods.

Second, there were the weekly *Focused Journaling Assignments*. These consisted of six identical questions that narrowed in on the participants images of God and self and whether the meditating upon these images provided more or less peace or anxiety. These were viewed chronologically to determine if and how the participant was changing in their identity "in Christ." For example, one question asked: "Have these Guided self-examinations led to more peace in my life by recognizing and living into my identity 'in Christ?' If so, please describe in detail. If not, please describe your experience of practicing the Guided self-examinations the last week."

The third and final data collection was the series of group interviews that took place at SDPC. SDPC has an early and a late service every Sunday with a Sunday School in-between. The group interviews took place the Sunday after Easter, April 16th during all three time slots. I worked as diligently as possible to see to it that the participants had every reasonable opportunity to report their experience of going through the GSE. The group interviews had two people at the early service, three during the Sunday School hour, and five at the late service. I later had one video interview with a single participant who was away on April 16th. The group format was chosen primarily to facilitate and encourage the volunteer participants to precipitate conversation from one another's

experiences. I facilitated these three time sessions, asking for similarities and differences in the experiences from those who were more quiet and reserved. For the group interviews, a sheet of questions was passed out with seven questions for discussion. Two example questions were: (1) "How have you lived differently due to participating in this project?" and (2) "What was the one major 'aha' moment with God you received this Lent?" These were merely starting points, but I asked these two questions specifically for all three group interview times. These sessions were all videorecorded to assure any quotations I used were verbatim.

I emailed and texted reminders to all the participants for them to bring their binders containing the Focused Journaling Assignments and the Post-Survey which I had emailed the previous week. The group of volunteer participants consisted of regularly attending persons and church members who were all over the age of eighteen. In hindsight, there were some things I would have done differently, including asking a question about how old the participant was when he or she "became a Christian," and how they would define what it means to "be a Christian." This would have helped build more foundation upon how long ago their initial images of God were planted. The Pre- and Post-Survey draws much of this information out, but it would have been advantageous to have a timeline for each participant to see when their image of God began including an emphasis on peace (including both cognitive peace and felt peace). One of my presuppositions was that the PCA tended to focus on the judicial aspects of being in relationship with God. This was not necessarily wrong, but it did not translate into as much reported anxiety as expected. Some of the volunteers had a loving relationship with God that was not primarily experienced as anxious.

After examining the Methodology and Implementation, this paper now explores the Summary of Learnings section where the data is presented and analyzed. The "Pre- and Post-Surveys" consisted of questions related to the participants image of God from their upbringing and in the present. These would be compared afterward to see if in the Post-Survey the volunteer had either re-ordered their childhood images, and if there were more or less images related to peace or anxiety. Another question asked about anxiety and peace specifically in the participants relationship with God with a numbered scale.

For a six-week project, I was not sure how much change I could expect to see in such a short amount of time. The answers generally remained more theological in nature and focused on active sanctification, that is, what the participant could do in their relationship with God. I was hoping to find more volunteers effected by the passive sanctification of God in their time with the Holy Spirit, increasing awe and a sense of peace. The devotional content stressed aspects of passive sanctification that stemmed from God's declaration of who the participant was in Christ. Overall, the participants spiritual posture tended to be centered around active sanctification more than passive.

There was a movement toward peace in the quantitative question section in two places. The first was an increase in the participants "cognitive peace" in their relationship with God. This Pre-Survey to Post-Survey data was reported from 9 of the 10 participants. The second was an increase in "emotionally felt (experienced in the body) peace you have in your relationship with God" which was reported in 7 of 10 surveys. I would suggest this points toward the malleability of the brain and how what we choose to focus on affects our overall spiritual posture, one's "being in the world."

One survey question asked "Describe what a closer relationship between God and yourself would look like. What does God look like in this relationship with you? 5 sentence limit please." The responses to this question were almost *all* in the active sanctification side both Pre- and Post-Survey. None of the participants mentioned what God would be doing, though some did mention spending more time with God in conversation, pointing towards increased intimacy and a deeper relationship. However, the focus was predominantly on what the *participant would do* to close any distance between themselves and God.

Almost all wrote about what they would either being doing (or not doing) which points to a performative theology and active sanctification. Two volunteers reported passive sanctification in the question referenced above stating: "In such a relationship, he continues to guide me." The second participant who referenced a more passive stance wrote, "God breaks through/I give up my claim on this world."

All theology is performative in one sense in that a person's actions reflect what they truly believe. Consider the difference between Judas and Peter. Both betrayed Jesus, but Judas's theology would not allow him to accept that Jesus could forgive him. Self-righteousness was primary for Judas as he attempted to return the silver he received for turning Jesus over to the chief priests and elders. For Peter, his theology eventually led him to act out of faith in what Jesus called him to do, to "feed my sheep" (John 21:17). Peter was able to re-order his own thinking and actions under Jesus Christ. Peter believed Jesus and then lived differently. His spiritual posture was shaped by Jesus, not by his own best thinking. For these participants at SDPC, the idea of passive sanctification, while acknowledged, biblical, and Reformed, is still practically secondary to what they do (or

do not do). The importance of this theological belief does not appear to have sunk down into the participants everyday lives and responses in the surveys. However, for a couple participants, they did report a lean towards "passive sanctification."

One change I would make for the Pre/Post-surveys if were I to do the project again would be to limit the participants responses, thereby narrowing down the answers to their most used images of God. For instance, the first question asks for the volunteer's first "5 images of God that come to your mind," and then asks for a short description of each image (three sentence limit). In hindsight, I would have limited this question to two images, to determine if there was a balancing of God as both "Holy and Loving" (as "Boundaried and Accommodating.") If both images fell towards one side of the spectrum (i.e., two responses as Holy, or two responses as Loving), I would have had a better idea of where the participant was coming from in their foundational image of God.

There were many theological answers and even specific names of God from the Bible such as El Shaddai, Jehovah-Jirah, El Roi, and Abba. From using the names and titles of God, I recognized a more formal relationship that appeared less personal based on the rest of the data collection methods. These were memorized responses and not as personalized. One participant wrote that she had a "hope of hugging Jesus when I get to heaven but I always wonder if that's too unrealistic. I hope not." We cannot ignore that Jesus also called his disciples his friends and that we share the same Father and God (John 20:17).

The *Focused Journaling Assignments* (FJAs) were the second data collection tool for this project. These consisted of six identical questions at the end of each week-long period during Lent, amounting to six FJAs for each participant. I was looking for

increased references to peace and any discernable patterns that might appear. One of the questions asked specifically if the images of God and of self had led to more peace or anxiety. The majority of participants reported "more peace" as opposed to "more anxiety" as their response. Here is a sampling of their answers: "More peace because I am not in control of my own sanctification." "As I spend time with the Lord, Peace increases." "Peace in the 'new self,' That's when I'm fully relying on God." "Peace – God is more compassionate than I usually think about Him." Many reported that there was not "new peace" or "more peace" but reminders for them to turn to the peace they already possessed in Christ.

Here is a sampling of some of the "more anxiety" responses: "Sometimes more anxiety because I feel a sense of separation from God." This response intrigued me as to the connection between anxiety and shame. It's no coincidence that the first emotion listed for Adam and Eve after sinning is shame ("At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves." Gen. 3:7, NLT) Perhaps a direction for further study would include the effects of shame in shaping a person's image of God. Are (unconscious) actions adaptive behaviors used to reduce anxiety, which comes from the shame of being separated from God? Another participant wrote: "Looking back I'm more anxious, faltering and being more drawn to escapist patterns." This honest response was anticipated on my part with the inclusion of the counseling referral materials in the devotional binders. The revelation of our true selves can be a painful experience and we often continue to return to lesser comforts instead of turning to God.

Some reported both more peace and anxiety in different areas of their lives simultaneously. The "more anxiety" responses were generally linked to the individual's own performance (their part in active sanctification). This means that the volunteer understood that God was trustworthy but was still striving in the areas over which they could "control." A sample of some of these responses is: "More anxiety in how I relate to others and particularly my view of my earthly father and his sins. I am called to forgive him as much as needed, just as Christ will forgive me as much as is needed." "Not so much anxiety – but a tension exists as one rests in Christ but also works for Christ." "Anxiety in my view of self." "Anxiety in my hesitancy to make changes." "Some of both. Peace because I know that God can overcome my incorrect viewpoints of him. Worry because of my role with teaching children. Have any of my wrong viewpoints slipped into my teaching?" "Both? Anxiety as I step up with God; Peace, as I know He is with me." "Both – more (needed) self-chastisement as I skate along 'on my own' – but less self-chastisement when I simply 'draw near to the throne of grace.'"

And here is a sample of other notable answers to questions from the FJAs: "The image of a loving God helps to remind me that I need to model that love to my boys and be a living example of that." "I feel that the self-examinations had forced me to look at myself with an attitude of love which reflects the Father's love for me." "Before this I never really thought about the idea that my image of God may not be the real God." These responses all reflect some of the themes built into the GSE: modeling, raising self-awareness, and an invitation into considering how we think about God which shapes our spiritual posture.

The last question in every week's FJA asked if the devotionals had increased the participants recognition of their "identity 'in Christ.'" Here are some of the responses as they expounded on the topic of the participant's experience of peace: "I believe that self-examination can often be a painful process but that in the end, with positive change, it can lead to peace." "Perhaps, it's led to more peace over all… a vast majority of my default behavior was/is to prevent reflection, so having the clarity to see even that much has been useful… I've had reflections before that revealed similar information I'd since forgotten and left." "I'm learning peace in the whole of my life everyday bit by bit. Recognizing God as ultimate authority moves me towards peace."

I was excited to see that this participant understood that peace is something *we can learn* and not just feel or experience. "It would be helpful to have expanded discussion of the insights and challenges gained from the GSE's." I agree with this comment, and if there is another iteration of the project in the future, I would make sure to have some kind of community processing time, whether weekly in person, or perhaps some electronic utilization such as a chatboard with people's experience posted. However, the in-person group interviews were excellent places for the participants to respond to one another's experiences. One participant suggested making the GSE available as an application (app) on his phone where he could speak his answers into the phone as "voice to text." It seems as if each individual would have benefited from a regular community processing time.

The third and final data collection method was the group interviews. There was also one additional video interview with a participant who was out of town on April 16th. Below I have listed some of the observations and quotes taken from each of the three

sessions. The first interview had two participants, one of whom is employed by the church while the other volunteers as a deacon. This small setting was particularly good for a back-and-forth rapport in which both got to share and chime in on their own experiences compared and contrasted with the other participant. I video recorded all sessions and reviewed them while transcribing the most salient points for this study.

Participant 1 (P1) said he began to see that he had errors embedded in how he saw Christ saying, "my version is *always* correct." He began to examine his presuppositions due to engagement with the GSE. As a Christian teacher and educator, he felt it crucial to make sure that he was communicating what the Bible said was "one hundred percent accurate." His favorite GSE was day 29, whose primary verse was Matthew 11:30, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." From this GSE, P1 saw the generational pattern from his family life stating, "We are workers." It was sometimes hard for him to accept grace after being raising in such an industrious home environment. He was constantly busy and recognized that sometimes his yoke did not seem like it was being directed by Jesus.

He stated that he knew Christ's blood was sufficient but that he was constantly allowing things from the past, from twenty or thirty years ago, to maintain space in his mind. P1 was also very aware of the self-image he would project due to his job in education. He was constantly "on," meaning he needed to appear to have the right answers and be always competent (if not excellent). He observed that when he would come home, he would act differently with his family as his image management would not be as strong a driver in private as it was in public. Unfortunately, he would then say and do things he often regretted. I asked him how this might be related to his image of God –

was he comfortable letting his own "image management" guards down so that he could be his true self with God? He responded "[with God, being] too comfortable can be a really dangerous thing… God is not a God to be trifled with." P1 also said he found the devotional was helpful in going through things he preferred to avoid. P1 also commented that he would do the GSE again saying, "I was going to go back and redo it just because I think it hits on a lot of the stuff I need to have exposed in my life." He found it to be a "helpful tool."

Participant 2 (P2) said he found the GSE helpful, but it was stressful to journal. Did it bring him peace? "Absolutely not." As he is not an organized person and does not journal. It was one more thing for him to get behind on and he held himself to a very high standard. He prefers to process verbally out loud and found the last week of the GSE to be the most edifying (the themes for that week were peace and wisdom). He referred to God as his "Go-to," or "The Dependable One." P2 finished by saying "I'm really glad I've done it now after all the anxiety of doing it." He was glad to have finished something that he started.

Participant 3 (P3) is a teaching Elder in the church. He started out by saying,

> The most important part of this whole exercise for me was sensitivity [to] the presence of God, the Holy Spirit in me. I believe there is a lack of that knowledge, that sensitivity, in most Christians, including me. We know God the Father well, we know God the son, we pray to both, often. I believe we fall short in calling on God the Holy Spirit.

He found the suggestions for bodily posturing while praying helpful (kneeling for humility, hands raised for praising and glorifying God, and open hands for receptivity to God). P3 expressed that he has been trying his whole life to be someone that he is not. "But one thing that he [God] has made very clear, the man that I thought I was, the man

that I wanted to be, is not what he has for me… He has a different calling on my life." I then asked him when this discernment process began, and he responded, "This happened within the last two or three months. Yeah, so the exercises pushed me to think more, to pray more. But the whole questioning of 'Why am I here?' started about two or three months ago." The GSE was a catalyst for the Holy Spirit to enter into this man's life. He commented that he would recommend, "…more emphasis on the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Sensitivity to the Holy Spirit talking to you." He found the reminders of, and repetition of the Holy Spirit's name, helpful in focusing on hearing God's voice.

Participant 4 (P4) expressed a hard time in keeping up with the material. She thought the devotional would be good for people whose "feelings are bouncing around." She stated she did not experience conflict within herself, between the old self and the new self, and believed that new Christians and those in crisis would get more out of these devotionals. She regularly participates in a Bible study that she "gets more out of," as it is a more thorough study. P4 also attends a regular prayer meeting where each week they focus on a different attribute of God, meditating and praying on that characteristic. Due to this familiarity with the images of God, she stated she did not find the devotionals particularly edifying.

Participant 5 (P5) loved the scriptures that were chosen for the devotional saying they were continually bringing her back to God. She stated "I'm not thinking that deeply about who I am or who I am in God anymore. I feel, generally, at peace about that." The devotionals were viewed as more of an "encouragement for the day," and good reminders than anything else. P5 did state that the GSE's were an invitation to more freedom. There was a particular situation and sin in her life that she had been struggling with for some

time and she was discouraged by her response in that life circumstances. Both P4 and P5 stated that the FJAs were not particularly helpful and that not much changed from week to week.

The last group interview had two married couples and one single man. Participants 6 (P6) and 7 (P7) are married, as are Participants 8 (P8) and 9 (P9). I was interested to see if either of the couples had a different experience than the single participants or those doing the GSEs without their spouse. However, neither couple reported processing their devotionals with their spouse. I believe that a future iteration of the GSE could be a helpful pre-marriage tool for dating couples, or as a devotional for married couples to go through together. The idea would be that because one's images of God and self are so central to identity, this would provide a space for the couples to create intimacy.

P6 reported several "aha" moments in the daily devotions. Her primary takeaway was how busy she experienced herself when attempting to slow down and spend time with the Holy Spirit. She was convicted to become more purposeful in her quiet time with God and raised a couple interesting points about her own level of self-awareness saying, "I just felt like God is the absence of anxiety, and, the source of peace, and so why would God make me feel anxious? If I feel anxious it's from somebody else [a reference to spiritual attacks she later clarified]." She also candidly said, "Why would I not want to be in relationship [with God]? But theres times I choose, I make bad choices."

P6's husband is identified here as P7. He appreciated the "intentionalized" time with God which he said, "cause[d] me to want to move in that direction [toward God's mercy]." P7's vocation is a clinical psychologist. He reported:

> And trying to be like that [perfect like God], can create incredible stress… I didn't measure up… I would try to avoid it [pain], run away from it and it causes us internal stress… Will you invite him [Jesus] into your pain? God wants to use the pain to help me grow… This [the GSE] has helped me begin to accept that there is a teaching in this [his pain] from God. …I practiced psychology for forty years, and the thing that most people have is stress. We don't want stress. How can we get it out of our lives? But the reality is, it's there all the time. It's how you process it and how you view it and how you might want to grow in it. Can we grow in stress? I would say yes.

P7 finished with a sense of awe at how much his own images of God had changed since he was little saying, "My images of God were very scary [as a child]."

Next were P8 and P9, a couple who experienced the GSEs quite differently. The husband found the devotional to be good supplemental material with the book he was reading with his small group which he stated also focused on images of God. The wife however, reported "I couldn't get into it," saying she was "not in the habit," and that "I didn't understand what you were asking in the questions." She stated that she found herself frustrated at how easily she would let her mind wander and find herself thinking about something else entirely. All the other volunteers present nodded their heads in agreement with this statement. I was disappointed that she found the questions difficult to understand, but when asked if the rest of the participants (in this group) found them difficult to understand, no one responded in the affirmative.

The last volunteer, Participant 10 (P10), reported that he struggled to keep up with the daily schedule and weekly focused journaling. He ended up finishing 33 of the 46 devotions and gave up on the last couple weeks. He reported being easily distracted and found himself reading and not remember anything he had just read, thus forcing him to go back and start over. The devotional was "useful" but didn't always resonate with him. He did report that he would find himself thinking about doing the devotional later each

evening, and that itself would remind him of God's presence. I asked, "Do you feel then, like it [the GSEs] raised your awareness of God being with you?" He said, shaking his head in agreement, "One hundred percent. Yeah, yeah." In this regard, the raising of self-awareness was achieved.

In the group interviews, two of ten volunteer participants reported that the devotional brought about more anxiety than peace as they were worried about falling behind and the quality of their answers. Their diligence might be viewed as an obstacle to spending time with God. I tried to make clear that it was more important to invite the Holy Spirit and listen for his voice than to have any sort of "theologically correct" response to the daily devotionals or weekly focused journaling assignments. The point was to get to know yourself and God better, not to "have it right." If I were to repeat this project I would have even more explicit instructions about the priority being to spend *relational* time with God.

I learned that there is no substitute for one-on-one discipleship, but that the GSE was helpful for guiding many of the participant's discipleship life into previously unexplored areas. Though I attempted to be clear in the instructions section of the GSE, there were still some minor miscommunications with two participants in the first week of the project. Another redesign idea that could be incorporated in future iterations of this project would be to have a different biblical image of God the focus of each week's devotions, along with questions related to how that image was reflected in the participants *Imago Dei*.

The primary goal for this project was to determine if the GSE would help strengthen the participants identity in Christ and increase their experience of peace. There

were several secondary goals for this project including: developing intentionally structured time in the participant's devotional time with God; raising self-awareness of God's presence at all times; and becoming aware of and developing one's spiritual posture in a way that glorifies God. The hypothesis focused on identity formation regarding one's images of God and self. In those terms, the project was moderately successful. Some participants reported newer images of God and others did not. Some participants reported increased peace and others did not. Fortunately, God's goodness spilled forth in other areas for the participants and seems to have planted some seeds in many of the volunteers.

The PCA, sometimes called the "frozen chosen," have a reputation for being a cognitively driven denomination. It would not be inaccurate to say that some Presbyterians try to "think their way out of problems." However, some things cannot be dealt with through a purely cognitively manner and the GSE introduced some aspects of resting with the Holy Spirit in a new way. Cognitive re-structuring will only take a person so far. Again, this is the difference between "change" which a person does, and "transformation" which can only happen through the Holy Spirit. For one participant, it seems to have led him in a new direction in his life entirely, even questioning his former attempts at identity creation and maintenance. While I hoped the "one-size-fits-all" approach would speak to more of the volunteers, I am grateful that a few of them reported the impacts of the GSEs on their life in an edifying manner. I am blessed and grateful for God's grace in this way.

My data indicates that there is no panacea when it comes to discipleship. Even with this small pool of participants, the reactions were quite varied and seemed to

discourage some and encourage others. Three volunteers said they found the format frustrating (even though one of them later said he was glad to have done it and finished it). Two people said they would do it again and a third wanted a copy of the devotional to go through certain portions again. One person wanted to be involved in whatever form the GSE took next. So, while some drew closer to God and knowledge of themselves, others seemed discouraged and were not edified by participating.

I also found that many volunteers did not fully complete their FJAs or left sections of the Pre/Post-Surveys empty. I understood that I was at the mercy of the volunteer participant's willingness to complete the tasks. For the data in this project, nine of the final volunteers completed the entire GSE, filled out the Pre/Post-Survey, and completed (at least partially) the Focused Journaling Assignments. In addition, there was one volunteer whose data was included. He completed over two-thirds of the GSEs, the Pre/Post-Survey, and participated in a group interview.

In conclusion, this project was both successful and unsuccessful in its hypothesis. The foundation and synergy papers drove me towards creating a tool that would be useful in discipleship in the SDPC congregants, specifically in strengthening their view of who they were "in Christ." For nine out of ten participants, there was a quantitative move towards "more peace" regarding their cognitive relationship with Christ (one participant reported no change). For emotionally experienced peace in one's body in regard to their relationship with God, the quantitative data was: one participant reported no change, two reported a decrease, and seven reported an increased sense of peace.

I predicted that SDPC would contain a much more homogenous pool of congregants and attendees. However, while the data shows that although there is some

overlapping aspects, the differences in the individuals were so varied as to make a single devotional tool ineffective for the group as a whole. While there were some similarities and patterns that were more common, the GSEs were not the solution to weak identity formation for every single volunteer. However, the Holy Spirit was kind enough to work through this project and God was glorified in a few people's lives as they were edified and transformed.

A potential area of further study could be the idea of individualized discipleship paths. Perhaps existing personality studies could be used to create more individualized models of discipleship. Whether from the Meyers-Briggs personality assessment, the Enneagram, or some other psychological model, having a raised level of self-awareness to engage with a more conducive Bible study or discipleship style relating to identity formation would be an excellent place to begin exploring. The GSE could be used as one tool for some persons seeking this particular form of discipleship.

Another area of further study that I've been drawn to is a "stages of faith" roadmap as it intersects with one's images of God. It is necessary that to first enter into a faith relationship with God, one must accept God for who he says he is. For later stages of faith and images of God to be accepted, the initial doors containing images of God as Creator and Judge must be passed through. The human must also admit their sin and need for redemption. For example, it is impossible for a person to truly be a friend of Jesus unless they first accept him for who he says he is and obey him. "You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard

from my Father I have made known to you." (John 15:14-15) Note too, that Jesus equates friendship with obedience here.

For the God of the Bible to be one's shield and rock, he must first be accepted as one's sustainer. Some teaching today focuses on the love of God without acknowledging what it cost God to make Christ's righteousness available to us. This overemphasizing of costly grace shapes one's spiritual posture. Likewise, churches that only stress the holiness of God end up downplaying the love that 1 John 4:8 so clearly states, "Anyone who does not love does not know God, *because God is love*" (emphasis added). For these persons, their spiritual posture is also shaped by their teaching and images.

The new Christian must know about the cross of Christ to understand both the love (mercy and grace) and the holiness (justice and righteousness) of who God is. One might accept Jesus as savior without fully understanding the magnitude of what God has done (I gladly admit I know but a small percentage of information about the depths of God). However, after understanding this initial image of God, it is expected that the disciple would continue to walk further along the path the Christ himself walked. Paul speaks of this clearly in Philippians 3:8-10 writing,

> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For this sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on Faith – that I may know him and the power of this resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

We are not called to suffer *for* Christ until we are already *in* Christ. Much teaching today seems to have reversed the order of these as personal works-righteousness is substituted for the work of Christ.

After these initial doors have been stepped through - the image of God as Creator and Judge, *then* one can walk through the door whose image has God as Savior. After that, God as Lord, and then God as Friend. We do not discard the previous images of God we have, but we continue to add to them, creating an even richer and more complex inventory and tapestry of God as both Holy and Loving. He will not be contained in only what we can understand, though we learn and experience more as time passes. Hearing other people's stories of how their images of God have changed showed me that God's love is varied and unstoppable.

Hopefully these images will bring the disciple to where Jesus stated, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35) Love looks different from God's perspective than from what we have learned, experienced, and idealize from our own best thinking. This Holy Love from God must be accepted on its own terms if it is to be accepted at all. After it re-creates us, it allows us to live and love as Jesus did. Let the following quote (variously attributed) help guide our images of God and self, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

So, how can a more balanced perspective of God and oneself be achieved? First by raising one's self-awareness and biblical knowledge. Humans are "meaning-making creatures," always working to know and understand the "why" behind things and not just the "what" or "how" of things. After recognizing one's own story within the larger context of God's story (seen in history and primarily through the bible and gospels), one can begin to interact with a more detached and existential point of view.

The second step after identifying and naming one's images of self and God in view of the biblical story is by engaging in community with others and with the Holy Spirit. Community is also stressed by Jesus in 1 John 4:7, 11, and 21:

> Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God…Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another… And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

The goal of this path is to become transformed by the power of God, into more of who he created humanity to be, the children of God. The end result of truly knowing God and following him is to become part of his family, a son or daughter of the king. So many churches and denominations are fighting over secondary matters. Undoubtedly important, but in ways that do not make Jesus attractive to the world. Why? Because the images of Jesus and God for much of the church today appear to be "weaponized browbeater," "spoilsport," and "vindictive judge." God does not smile toward us so much as he is constantly frowning. People do not see God as the loving authority who withholds his immeasurable power to show us that his way of love is superior. Many of us are still doing God's work in our own way instead of his. While the community aspect was not the focus for this project, the group interviews revealed the Holy Spirit working in the hearts and minds of the participants.

Only by the Holy Spirit and the church's witness will Jesus and the God of the Bible be seen as joyful, loving, and holy all at the same time. God is engaged in the divine dance (i.e., *perichoresis*) of his ontological being in this very moment. His disciples, friends, and children are all invited to participate in this same dance with him.

The GSE can help those who lean toward the "holy side" of God to be gently nudged toward the "loving side" of God. Hopefully those on the "free-love side" can be

gently nudged towards the holiness of God. Taken together, the God of the Bible, the "Boundaried Accommodator" can be better seen, heard, and experienced in this world through his children.

Many of the participants referenced in the data how drastically their image of God was today from when they were children. The precipitating event(s) for changing their image was nearly always through a relationship with another person. I hope the GSE will be a tool that helps people increase their self-awareness and question their images of God. It is a provocation to ask oneself, "Why do I believe this?" and "What happened to impact my life this way, and where was God during this time?" "Why do I feel this way about myself and God?" "Does this match up with God's word and how can I discard these wrong ideas and replace them with what God says about himself and about me?"

The journey was a large part of the destination for me in this project. I have been changed in many ways due to the structure of UTS's DMin program. Discipleship means "student" or "learner," and I've been discipled by the progression of semesters building upon one another. I was able to serve my context church and give back to some of the parishioners. Even before the idea of a spiritual discipline or devotional, it was clear that there were plenty of tools available for those who were searching. The customization of the GSE for SDPC was not one hundred percent accurate, but based on the reporting, several of the volunteers encountered God in either a new way, or a refreshed way. One man in particular viewed the GSE as a catalyst for God calling him to a new identity. He was leaving behind the person he thought he was supposed to be. Another participant was going to adapt the GSE into part of his weekly small group meetings. I look forward to hearing about what God does in his group setting.

Ultimately, the GSE has been a blessing to me. My cry to God was "Make me an example of what your presence can do to a sinful man" (my paraphrase of Psalm 51:13). I still have far to go and far to grow, but I understand more than ever that I can change my crooked little heart all I want, but *it is God who does the transformation*. *He is the one who makes things new by his power*. I desired to glorify God in some way through my own experiences. I wanted the pains of my life to benefit others in some way, which happened. I have a simultaneously more simple and more complex image of God and myself than before beginning this journey three years ago. I am grateful to be one of the branches. May this small offering of what God has blessed me with, bless others and glorify God. Soli Deo gloria.

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE OF GUIDED SELF-EXAMINATIONS

Guided self-examination – day 1 of Lent – Ash Wednesday

Preparation for Encounter with God

Today's scripture

"But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?'" Genesis 3:9

Pause and Meditate with the Holy Spirit's presence listening for his voice

Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ

One of the goals for these *Guided self-examinations* is to increase awareness of one's spiritual posture. Spiritual posture defined here as the interaction between a person's images of self and God and how these effect one's being and actions. A person's *Imago Dei* is a fact of his or her personhood. One's spiritual posture reflects the subjective handling of that *Imago Dei.*

Not only does the Bible refers to humanity and to God in a variety of ways, we each have our own storeroom of images. As Christians, we also carry in our bodies the life and death of Christ. In addition, we have access to the "old man" that we were before being brought into union with Jesus. Human beings are complex creatures - and Christians even more so! The idea of having God dwell within a person is paradigm shattering.

The first question God poses in the Bible is "Where are you?" This question reveals some of God's character, as he already knew where Adam and Eve were hiding. God often only shows us a small part of who he is and restrains himself in his slow revelation. The invitation to dialogue with God was for Adam and Eve to see that they themselves did not know where they were, or who they were.

We might wonder why God would ask us questions that he already knows the answer to. Most teachers would be able to tell you that the best teaching they do facilitates the student to the place where they are able to work out the problem for themselves. This incorporates the knowledge into the person more deeply than just being told the solution.

Imagine God asking you this same question today: "Where are you?" Invite the Holy Spirit to bring to you an image, thought, or feeling that communicates God's presence. You've likely read this question before, but you are different in this unique moment than every other moment. What particular area of life/context does God lead you to when he asks, "Where are you?" What does God look like in your mind as you picture him asking you this question? Is he smiling? Frowning? Chuckling? Why and what does that say about your image of God and self that he has this particular emotional posture? How can I regularly use questions in my life to differentiate what I say about myself versus what God says about me?

Prayer

Questioning God, thank you for continuing to invite me into dialogue with you. Help me to differentiate your voice from the multitude that I hear every day so that I might follow it. Thank you for giving me life through your word and for saving me from

sin, myself, and the world. Help me to make you the object of my faith continually. Amen.

God's Reassurance

"Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not turn to the proud,
to those who go astray after a lie!" Psalm 40:4

Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today:

Guided self-Examination - day 2 of Lent

Preparation for Encounter with God

Today's scripture

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness… So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:26-27

Pause and Meditate with the Holy Spirit's presence listening for his voice

Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ –

God is Triune – 3 persons in 1 God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who are distinct in personhood yet equal in being. In God's self-revelation, there are frequently paradoxes that stretch human understanding. This ultimately leads one to mystery and the deeper question of God's character – is the biblical God trustworthy? Even when I can't or don't understand him?

As God is both plural and singular, then we as his image bearers are as well. For the Christian, this includes the "old self," that is, who we were before being born again through Christ's righteousness. The "new self" is the gift of God which is both blessing and responsibility. Part of sanctification is learning to, and practicing, living out of the "new self," instead of the "old."

When we consider the multiplicity of selves that we contain in our single body, we begin to realize that to have a unified and integrated self can be incredibly difficult. We have various "parts" inside us, each with its own voice and reasons for wanting what it wants. Learning to live with these parts is the task of every human. However, Christians have the Holy Spirit to help them manage and love these parts by bring them into a functional "team." Unless our parts are unified as God is, there will be discord within us. Every part is valuable and needs to meet Jesus for wholeness to occur.

Are there parts in me, such as the "old self," that are working against Christ's Lordship in my life? Can I identify these parts that seek to lead me away from Christ? What does the voice of the "old self" in me sound like? How can I increase the "new self's" voice in my life today and in the future?

Prayer (consider a posture of humility such as kneeling for this prayer)

God who is both One and Triune, sometimes all I can understand is that I don't understand. Thank you for your complexity and for coming down in Jesus, who often seemed inscrutable, but was the perfect image of you towards humanity, being both fully God and fully human. Father, we are made in your image, help us to understand both you and ourselves as we seek to steward our lives for abundant and wise living in Christ Jesus, spreading his kingdom in our lives and the world.

Help me bring every part of who I am to you. Give me grace to accept your desires for my life. Help me to be patient through your power, not my own, as I embark on healing my inner world alongside you. You are the great Physician. Your love and guidance will keep me safe by Christ's righteousness. Amen.

God's Reassurance

"But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. Fear not, for I am with you.'" Isaiah 43:1-5

Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today:

Guided self-examination – day 8 of Lent

Preparation for Encounter with God

Today's scripture

"To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and the unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works." Titus 1:15-16

Pause and Meditate with the Holy Spirit's presence listening for his voice

Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ

The bible tells us that the *Imago Dei* is objective fact and reality - every human is an image bearer of God. The two images (of God and of self) that make up one's *Imago Dei* are of supreme importance - both objectively (from God's perspective) and subjectively (from our perspective). When either of these images changes, the other changes as well.

These verses explore the subjective side of one's relationship with God and self. The way one thinks, acts, and behaves is related to one's idea of God. This is similar to what psychologist call "projection." People tend to think, believe, and act as if others thought, believed, and behaved as they do. Each person experiences life from their particular body, genetics, culture, and experience.

The image of God that I operate out of determines how I will operate myself. If I believe that God is like this or that, then I will be like this or that as well. If my image of God is generally angry or compassionate, I will mimic this behavior whether I am aware of it or not. Is my current image of God more like a doting grandparent, an angry drunk, a wise counselor, a business manager, or _____? Whatever the case, I will act accordingly. The Bible contains hundreds of images of God revealing his dynamic nature. Those who "deny him by their works," are simply operating from a non-negotiable aspect of being human. Following different gods produces different works. The Christian likewise professes that they know God by their words and works.

The God of the Bible is clearly *holy* (meaning "other, different") from humanity even though we are made in his image. Isaiah 55:8-9 says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Does my perception of God today reflect the reality of who he claims to be and who he says I am? Am I following other images of God? Where did these come from and why are they trustworthy or not? Is there anyone in my life that I have not been treating with the dignity and respect they deserve as a person made in the image of God? Perhaps myself? How can I practice more awareness in my images of God and self tomorrow?

Prayer (consider a posture of humility such as kneeling for this prayer)

Holy other God, we thank you that you do not change and are on a mission to transform your people to receive more truth about you, reality, and ourselves. Illuminate our unknowing darkness. Bring your light into our minds, emotions, and spirits as we make you our shield and take refuge in you. We praise you for who you are and that we are marked with your image. Amen.

God's Reassurance

"With the merciful you show yourself merciful with the blameless man you show yourself blameless;
with the purified you show yourself pure and with the crooked you make yourself tortuous.
…This God – his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those
who take refuge in him." Psalm 18:25-26, 30

Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today:

Guided self-Examination – day 15 of Lent

Preparation for Encounter with God

Today's scripture

"If you are the Son of God…
If you are the Son of God…

All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."
The devil tempting Jesus – Matthew 4:3, 5, 9

Pause and Meditate with the Holy Spirit's presence listening for his voice

Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ

What is underneath the "if" statements that Satan uses in each temptation? How do you interpret them?

In Genesis 3:1 the serpent tempts Eve by saying, "Did God actually say…" In both cases with Jesus and Eve, Satan is implying something underneath the surface temptations. He is subtly and indirectly attacking God's goodness and character behind his prodding and justifications, essentially saying God is withholding from us. How does this align with your image of God on a spectrum of "not-at-all" to "seems-about-right?"

In both cases Satan tried to get those he is tempting to act in their own power and timing instead of trusting God. Satan is saying we are entitled to everything that God has – that there could be no good reason to trust that God might be holding things back from us for our own good - things that could be potentially harmful. Satan is saying that we can handle whatever is out there on our own - that our assessment of the situation is better than God's. Eve took the word of the serpent over the word of God. Jesus could have acquiesced to any of Satan's prompts but did not.

Notice that both Jesus's and Eve's image of God and of themselves are the place where the situation is reasoned out and then a choice is made. These temptations are attacks on the identity of God and of us as humans bearing the *Imago Dei*. The most foundational place where we live out of is our images of God and self. If we have poor or partially false images of God or self, we will act accordingly. If we use a true image of God or self in the wrong time or place, we can also put ourselves at a disadvantage. Only by keeping in step with the Spirit and living out of Christ in us will we be able to determine the most life-giving images of God and self. How can I best love the Lord with all my heart, strength, mind, and soul and my neighbor as myself? Sometimes it's with an image of God as the Bread of Life, other times as a Shepherd, and other times as Judge. Perhaps it's a combination of multiple images.

How are the temptations in your own life related to character attacks on God? What might faulty images of God do to my own image of self and how I live in the world? Looking back over my day, do I recognize any times when I was tempted to believe that God is not good or trustworthy?

Prayer (consider a posture of humility such as kneeling for this prayer)

Father God, thank you for making me, revealing yourself to me, and saving me. Help me to see temptations for what they are and to trust you above any other voices in our lives. Amen.

God's Reassurance

"Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, 'Who sees us? Who knows us?' You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, 'He did not make me'; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, 'He has not understanding'? …And

those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding, and those who murmur will accept instruction." Isaiah 29:15-16, 24

Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today:

Guided self-examination – day 17 of Lent

Preparation for Encounter with God

Today's Scripture

"But *when he came to himself*, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.
Treat me as one of your hired servants."' Luke 15:17-19 [emphasis added]

Pause and mediate with the Holy Spirit's presence while listening for his voice

Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ

How did the son's image of himself change *when he came to himself*? How did his changed image of himself effect his image of God? How did he live differently after this "self-encounter?"

What other meanings can we draw out of the younger son's experience? At a minimum, it meant he reasoned with himself about his situation. The younger son, through his pain, came into a further depth of truth than he previously had. Often, pain is a great motivator. The psalmist wrote, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word." (Psalm 119:67). Some people say that "Until the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change, nothing will change."

What pains did you feel today? Does pain "bring you to yourself," or is it a reason to "run away from yourself" by addictions, numbness, or distractions? Could today's pain be God turning your face towards reality to prevent a greater pain in the future?

What kind of lesson does your pain teach you? Are you able to take it to God to ask what it means when you aren't sure? Emotional pain is a difficult thing to navigate without the Holy Spirit. Pain itself is not the issue. Pain is a signal that something is wrong. The issue is how we decide to deal with the pains in our life. We are unreliable decision makers when we allow pain to be our guide.

What is my relationship with pain? Is it my teacher or my enemy? Paul wrote in Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceable with all." Am I in a relationship of peace with my pain? Often, avoiding pain causes more suffering than facing the pain itself. What does your image of self tell you about your relationship with pain? Are you avoidant or confrontational? Where do you hear God leading you in your relationship with pain? Will you invite him into your pains?

Prayer (consider a posture of humility such as kneeling for this prayer)

Father God, I confess that I do not learn easily or submit to wisdom quickly. I often try to deal with difficulties and pain in my own wisdom. I sometimes cope in unhealthy ways instead of facing reality. Help me to be willing to "come to myself."

You are the Savior and Father I need. I cannot save myself. I praise you for your love toward me, like a father running to meet his shame-filled son. I give you my shame as well. You call me your beloved child and not your servant. Help me to understand that I am who you say I am. Even though the prodigal son began to recognize his problems, he still wanted to tell his Father who he was – a hired servant. Help us to *accept what you say about who we are* – that we are precious to you, and you smile and celebrate when you see us returning to you. Help us bring any parts of us that are straying back to you now. Amen.

God's Reassurance

"Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."
Isaiah 1:18

Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today:

Guided self-examination – day 26 of Lent

Preparation for Encounter with God

Today's scripture

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him,
he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." - Jesus in John 15:5

Pause and Meditate with the Holy Spirit's presence listening for his voice

Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ

There are seven "I am" statements from Jesus Christ in John's gospel. Today's verse is the last of these statements and the culmination of a series of images that Christ has presented for us to understand who we are in relationship with him.

The vine and branches are an *organic living image*. It's difficult to determine where a vine ends and a branch begins. Underneath what is visible is the interior flow of life from the central vine to the outermost branches. Fruit grows on branches, not on vines. Christians are called to bear fruit and Jesus tells us that this happens through mutual abiding – not by one's individual efforts. Mutual abiding means patience on our part and relying on God's power and timing. *There is never a time when God is not faithful towards us.* Anytime we experience a disconnection from God, we must understand that it is an *experience* of a particular time and not the final word on a circumstance or on us.

Organic growth is slower than we like to admit. Most fruit tree take several years to gain the maturity necessarily connected to bearing fruit. There are first many seasons

that take the tree into deep rooted growth. For instance, apple and olive trees don't typically bear fruit until their third year.

How am I organically connected to Jesus? Is my connection to Christ more like a manager and employee, or more like the vine and branches? How does this organic image make you feel? Comforted or uncomfortable? Why? Was there a time today when this would have been more life-giving than a different image I was looking through?

Prayer (consider a posture of humility such as kneeling for this prayer)

Father God, the Vinedresser of my life, Jesus Christ, the Vine to who I am connected, Holy Spirit, the indwelling connector of my soul, thank you for loving me. I generally don't understand the painful pruning in my life. I doubt your goodness when I don't see my life bearing fruit when I think it ought to be there. Help me to bring these thoughts and all others to you, *so that we might sit with them together.*

My disappointment does not mean you have failed me. Rather, it is an opportunity for me to see more of your mystery and inscrutability. Help me to learn about myself in these circumstances and to continue to develop my image of you simultaneously. Help me to continue to grow in dependence on Christ Jesus and to praise you and be thankful in all circumstances with prayer. Amen.

God's Reassurance

"Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." Colossians 2:6

Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today:

Guided self-examination – day 29 of Lent

Preparation for Encounter with God

Today's scripture

"For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11:30

Pause and mediate with the Holy Spirit's presence while listening for his voice

Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ

Consider today's verse. Is it indicative of your relationship with Jesus? Is your yoke of following Jesus easy? Is he carrying the heavy side of life for you? Are you moving at his pace or attempting to direct the yoke and pace yourself?

What burdens were most often on your heart and mind today? Pray now asking Jesus to take the things that weigh you down. Would you be willing to trust him with important areas you have been keeping him out of?

I know I value certain areas of my life more than others and often keep Jesus out of certain rooms in my heart. Have a conversation with Jesus about any dark areas in your soul and witness that he is the wonderful counselor. Consider having a conversation

with a physical person you trust as well. Look for both inner and external confirmation of God's voice towards these areas.

Today's verse highlights the non-negotiable aspect of having both a yoke and a burden in this life. The implicit idea is that other yokes are neither easy nor light. Jesus offers the only true path of peace and freedom – that is, the one where he is with us in this life. Would you consider switching from whatever yoke and burden you currently carry for Christ's? Are there burdens that you've asked Jesus to carry for you that you know he won't bless? Are there burdens Christ has asked you to bear that you have refused?

What does my current "yoke" reflect about my relationship with God? What will I do when I recognize that I'm bearing something that Christ should have? What will I do when I recognize that Jesus has a challenge for me regarding something he would have me carry? What does my picture of Jesus look in these situations?

Prayer (consider a posture of humility such as kneeling for this prayer)

Come Lord Jesus into the dark places where your light will illuminate and cleanse me. Thank you for making me the way I am and that I bear your image. I am transformed by abiding in you. Thank you for the opportunity to bring your light into whatever is darkening my heart. Remove my selfish pride and self-assurance. I need you God to do these things I cannot do on my own. My own strength cannot remove the contamination and damage in my soul. I cannot heal myself, so God I ask you, please restore me now. Thank you for your mercy, justice, love, and the treasures I receive in Jesus Christ, your son, my Savior and Lord, my brother and friend. Amen.

God's Reassurance

"The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."
Psalm 121:8

Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today:

Guided self-examination - day 31 of Lent

Preparation for Encounter with God

Today's scripture

"…our God is a consuming fire." Hebrews 12:29
"…I came to cast fire on the earth…" - Jesus, Luke 12:49

Pause and Meditate with the Holy Spirit's presence listening for his voice

Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ

Fire is incredible. It can destroy entire forests and country sides, it can purify and cleanse with heat, it brings light, and provides life-giving warmth. In one sense, all gods that are worshipped are "fires" – the only difference is in what is sacrificed and

worshipped. In other religions, humanity sacrifices to appease its god. Only in Christianity is God himself the sacrifice and appeasement for righteousness and salvation. It is a non-negotiable to worship something and how we think, behave, and live reveals what we are worshipping. Other gods will consume us, but only Jesus Christ sacrifices himself for us, for our benefit, to cleanse us, to draw us close to him. Fire is good, but only in the right place, right location, right time, and right strength.

God's words carry power ("'Let there be light,' and there was light" Genesis 1:3). Humans, made in God's image, also have power in their words, which can be like fire, either cauterizing and healing or more like destructive flame throwers. We image the biblical God when we use our words for life-giving purposes.

Jesus's words brought light and truth which illuminated false beliefs and ideas for what they were. Our own words can be like fire as James 3:8-11 says: "No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?"

As I examine the words I spoke today, did they encourage people to walk a path that leads to God? What about the words I directed towards myself – were these life-giving in both content *and the manner in which I spoke them to myself*? What about silent words not spoken aloud – have I given these over to God if they were said from a posture of self-centeredness? If not, this is an opportunity to do so.

Prayer (consider a posture of humility such as kneeling for this prayer)

God whose words bring life, thank you for making me in your image. Thank you for the power you have entrusted to me with my own words. I see that your words and actions are the same and that often my words and actions do not align. I confess that I often misuse my tongue to tear people down instead of building them up. I find satisfaction in proving other people wrong more than I do about sharing the truth in a loving way as I would want to be told. Please have my relationship with you burn off the dross in my life. Help me to love myself as you love me and to love my neighbor as I love myself. Preserve me as I rest in Christ. Amen.

God's Reassurance

"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find
grace to help in time of need." Hebrews 4:14-16

Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today:

Guided self-examination – day 36 of Lent

Preparation for Encounter with God

Today's Scripture

Martha - "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Jesus - "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believe in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Mary - "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Jesus - "Where have you laid him?" …Jesus wept.

John 11:21, 25-26, 32, 34-35

Pause and Meditate with the Holy Spirit's presence listening for his voice

Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ

Every follower of Christ is like *all others*, like *some others*, and like *no other*. Martha and Mary were sisters who each spoke an *identical* statement to Jesus, yet he responds in a different way to each of them. You would think that the truth is the same for every individual, and it is. But we often focus on *only one aspect* of the truth.

Jesus is the *living* truth, but each sister needed to hear a *different aspect* of God's truth. It didn't make any of what Jesus said any less true when he didn't have the same response to their identical statements. The most loving and life-giving thing that each sister needed to hear was different. What Jesus spoke to Martha was for her and not for Mary in that circumstance and vice versa. Does this mean that Jesus "bent" the truth for each of them? Certainly not. Rather, each sister needed *to focus on a particular aspect of God's truth in that particular moment.* Martha needed to focus on the person of Jesus as Messiah while Mary needed the truth of Jesus as the God who weeps with us. Jesus is both of these simultaneously and *so much more* as he is in relationship with every human created. Every individual person relates to the truth of Christ in a different way in different times and contexts.

Today, in this moment, what truth about Jesus (one specific image of God) do I need to hear and meditate upon? What does Jesus want to do in my heart and life today, right now? What concern, complaint, or request can I take to Jesus? Do I recognize the danger of making god in my own image instead of allowing him to come to me as he is and shaping me? Which of Jesus's responses resonates with me? Which response do I desire? What does this reveal about my current relationship with God?

Prayer (consider a posture of humility such as kneeling for this prayer)

Jesus, thank you for being the resurrection and the life. Thank you for being the God who weeps beside us in our grief. You are a God of many names, titles, and actions. You are *dynamic* and we often forget that you desire to be present in our lives continuously. You ask us as we pray: "Will you trust who I am and my will in this circumstance? Will you share your grief with me? Will you accept me as I am?"

Christ, give us the faith to follow you as you have presented yourself to us. You know us better than we know ourselves. You are trustworthy when we don't understand your will. Give us as much truth as we can handle, in such a way that it will not break us. Thank you for dwelling within us, as Spirit, through your word, and in your bride, the church. Amen.

God's Reassurance

"Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." Isaiah 1:18-20

Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today:

Guided self-examination – day 37 of Lent

Preparation for Encounter with God

Today's scripture – read twice out loud slowly

"Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.
Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes."
Proverbs 26:3-4

Pause and Meditate with the Holy Spirit's presence listening for his voice

Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ

What is your first impression of today's scripture? It's no mistake that these two verses are next to each other. What do you make of these seemingly contradictory instructions?

Knowledge and information are not the same as wisdom. Wisdom can be defined as appropriate thinking and acting with the Spirit of God in one specific context. Our scripture today shows that wisdom differs according to the circumstance. Knowledge and information can be obtained without acting upon them. Wisdom is *the application of knowledge and information in one's own life and context*. A person might have the true and correct response for a fool, but then might make himself like the fool if he responds. Other times a person might act as a fool by *not responding* to a fool (let's be honest here, we are all fools at one time or another).

Christians collect information like all people do. However, a Christian spiritual posture relates to how we carry and apply such knowledge, which is part of being a Christ follower. We are called to have such an intimate relationship with God that we would know when to speak and when to be silent. We are called to speak "the truth *in love*" (Ephesians 4:15, emphasis added). Interestingly, Jesus was frequently silent when asked a direct question. He more often responded with his own question. Perhaps the question we could ask ourselves is: What is the most loving response for this person in this circumstance to offer them a glimpse of God?

In what areas of my life do I accumulate knowledge without practicing it in my life? How can I act less like a fool in my own relationships? What do you think God is communicating to you through these verses? Does the Holy Spirit bring a person or

image to mind? When I think I've acted like a fool, is the same as when God sees me acting like a fool?

Prayer (consider a posture of humility such as kneeling for this prayer)

God of Wisdom, I confess I often treat knowledge as an idol, believing that if I acquire enough, I will be safe and secure apart from you. I keep you at arms-length as I operate out of my "obedience" in works-righteousness. The truth is that there is no place safe or secure apart from you. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5), which is an incredibly humbling place to begin from. Please give me the faith and courage to act out of *your* wisdom and not my own. Help me not to be wise in my own eyes as I humble myself before you, asking for your wisdom, guidance, perseverance, courage, and power. Only you Father God, see my present as the past that it will become as I pass through time. Help me trust you above all other knowledge. I praise you for your timeless and unaccommodating truth that finds me in my own timely situation and leads me to life. Amen.

God's Reassurance

"Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. Preserve my life, for I am godly; save your servant, who trusts in you – you are my God. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all the day. Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you O Lord, do I lift up my soul." Psalm 86:1-4

Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today:

Guided self-examination – day 38 of Lent

Preparation for Encounter with God

Today's Scripture

"But with me it is a very small things that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God." 1 Corinthians 4:3-5

Pause and mediate with the Holy Spirit's presence while listening for his voice

Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ

Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, claims that the place of making judgments in his life belongs to God, and not himself. Courtrooms are places where defendants are found guilty or innocent of an accusation brought before the judge. In John's gospel, Jesus calls the Holy Spirit our *paraclete* (generally translated as "advocate" or "counselor" in English). However, this was a technical Greek term used for "legal

defense" or "lawyer." The Holy Spirit dwells in us providing "legal counsel." Thank God we are not responsible for our own defense.

Even Christians, Paul writes, cannot know the things that are hidden in darkness or the purposes of the heart – even our own sometimes! Unless we explore the spaces of our inner life with the Holy Spirit, we will be prone to self-deception, rationalization, and justification. We need God's help in discerning the mysterious parts of our hearts.

Paul says he doesn't even trust the judgments he makes on himself! What freedom! He knows how his heart might twist his mind's reasoning into a place that God would never lead him. This is one reason we need strong *and* kind biblical community in our lives who will correct us in our high or low opinions of ourselves and others. We have a hard time discerning the truth when we are making judgments about ourselves.

Do I think I am capable of being a better judge of character or the situation than God? Surely the disciples thought so when Jesus was being tortured and then crucified. What does faith in God look like for me when I trust him instead of an image of him that reveals what he "ought to be doing?" What does that look like in my life today?

Prayer (consider a posture of humility such as kneeling for this prayer)

God the final Judge, I know I often make my consideration of a person (even myself) the rationale for living life the way I think is right. Perhaps I am correct sometimes, but often I am wrong. God, you are the one in the court sitting with the gavel. I find myself in multiple places: as the defendant, the prosecution, or as a member of the jury – frequently in numerous places in one circumstance! Regardless of where I find myself, I am always in *your court*. Help me to rely on the Holy Spirit for his legal counsel and defense. Thank you for relieving me of the burden of making things right in my own power. I am unable to do so and am shocked that I sometimes think I can! I bless you Lord, Judge, for being merciful to me in your own holy loving rationale and righteousness. Amen.

God's Reassurance

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you declares the LORD…" Jeremiah 29:11-14

Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today:

Guided self-examination – day 40 of Lent

Preparation for Encounter with God

Today's scripture

"Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. *Selah*
Offer right sacrifices and put your trust in the LORD." Psalm 4:4-5

Invitation to Wholeness and Resting in Christ

Looking back over today, were there moments when I was angry? If you were not angry at any point today, when was the last time you can remember?

What does it mean to "be angry and do not sin?" Do I believe, or have I been taught, that to be angry is to sin? Experiencing a feeling is not sinful. In fact, one can argue that to either suppress or indulge one's emotions is actually sinful. However, *what we do with our feelings* can be sinful. In other words, we feel our emotions and we do not let them control us. This is *Both/And* - not *Either/Or*. We can both *feel* and *not sin* at the same time in God's power.

Today's second verse then says to "ponder and be silent" or to "practice self-examination in God's presence." Verse 5 gives directable expressions of worship ("right sacrifices") and faith ("in the LORD") for times after processing emotions (anger or otherwise) and befriending one's own heart.

God experiences anger as righteous because he is good. Humans often experience unrighteous anger (from a sinful heart) and express it unrighteously (through sinful actions). For Christians, because God has turned his anger from us, we are able to turn our anger from ourselves and others.

Did I experience an *inordinate* amount of anger today? Was my anger coming from God's righteousness against sin, or from somewhere else? Would I describe myself as an angry person? Would others who know me well or those I work with describe me that way?

If I didn't experience any anger today, is it possible that I *ought* to have been angry at some point but instead operated out of a posture of deadened emotions?

How does my image of God come out in my own anger? Next time I see myself operating out of anger, what steps can I take to make sure I am not sinning in this emotion?

Prayer (consider a posture of humility such as kneeling for this prayer)

God, you are a Righteous Judge who feels anger every day (Psalm 7:11). Thank you for allowing your son's righteousness to make payment for me which cleanses me from my sin. Jesus Christ became sin for me so that I might become the righteousness of God! I know I struggle with handling my own anger in healthy and non-destructive ways, whether towards you, myself or others. I recognize that my anger reveals that I am seeking to protect something I value. Often though, my values and priorities do not align with yours God. Help me to re-prioritize my life according to what you desire Father. You know what is best for me. Help me to believe that even when I disagree or don't understand. Make the fire of my selfish anger burn out and be replaced with gratitude for you and your wholly other and holy anger. Amen.

God's Reassurance

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin,
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Corinthians 5:21

"I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them.
They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine; their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon." Hosea 14:4, 7

Choose one word or sentence that sums up your experience with God today.

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